00070689

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 02 July, 2018

SIR JASPER'S TENANT

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

SIR JASPER'S TENANT

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

70689

LONDON

JOHN MAXWELL AND COMPANY

122 FLEET STREET

M DCCC LXV

[All rights reserved]

00070689

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

TO MY DEAR FRIEND

THE AUTHOR OF "WHITEFRIARS"

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	How he came to Scarsdale	1
II.	Up at the Great House	23
III.	Was he wise?	61
IV.	Dorothy's Impressions	90
V.	"At first her Image was a dreamy Thing"	119
VI.	"All within is dark as Night"	146
VII.	Dorothy's Conquest	158
VIII.	An unwelcome Letter	183
IX.	A florid Widow	202
X.	Mrs. Harding sees a familiar Face	223
XI.	Why did she do it?	235
XII.	Driven away	254
XIII.	Awkward for Sir Jasper	275
XIV.	The Widow makes herself at Home	296

SIR JASPER'S TENANT

CHAPTER I.

HOW HE CAME TO SCARSDALE.

SEVEN o'clock on a fine dry October evening and a red sunset behind the gaunt walls and bare windows of Roxborough Castle; red splashes of light upon the broad waters of the Merdrid river; lurid patches upon all the windows facing westward in the quaint old town of Roxborough; and in Sir Jasper Denison's park, and all the woods surrounding that grand old domain, long trails of crimson glory slanting between the brown boles of the trees, and creeping to darkness far away amongst the fern.

Seven o'clock, and the London express, due

in Roxborough at twenty minutes after seven, was to bring with it Sir Jasper's Tenant, the unknown personage who had hired a certain modest tenement, or shooting-box, hidden deep in the heart of Scarsdale wood, and let furnished by the Baronet to any respectable occupant who cared to give a decent price for a secluded habitation in a picturesque locality.

The secluded habitation was known as the Hermitage, which romantic title had been given to it by some sentimental occupant in days gone by. There was a story connected with it, a tragical story, such as generally belongs to a place of this kind: the story of a faithless wife, a midnight meeting, a servant's treachery, and a surprise—a shrieking woman locked in an inner chamber, and watching through a keyhole—a duel to the death, and then a flight on horseback through the black woods away to the open country, and the miry roads leading London-wards—an inquest at the Hermitage—a suicide found stark and stiff in a London lodging-house—and, last of all, a mad woman, living her dreary life

for five-and-twenty miserable years in the great mansion yonder in the Park, and never uttering one coherent sentence in all those years, but in the paroxysms of her madness always doing the same things and saying the same words; always watching through a keyhole, and beating with frantic hands against a door, and screaming out that there was murder being done within.

There were many versions of this story, which may have been somewhat legendary in its character. It related to a noble race which was extinct, and to a time in which men wore fantastically frizzed periwigs upon their heads, and carried slim rapiers at their sides, always conveniently ready for any little impromptu in the way of an assassination in the badly lighted streets, or a duel to the death in some lonely chamber with locked doors.

If you had been an amateur artist on the look-out for a subject for a water-colour drawing, scarcely any thing could have been better for you than the Hermitage, lying low in a deep hollow of Scarsdale wood, with trackless depths

of fern stretching away to the left of its grim walls, and a still black pool lying to the right of the old ivy-grown gate surmounted by a stone escutcheon, and marking the boundary of a garden that was no more.

In a water-colour drawing nothing could have been more delightful than the queer gable-ends and heavy stack of chimneys, the small diamond-paned windows, the narrow deeply-set door studded with knobs of rusty iron, the mossy stains and creeping parasites upon the wall, the rotting wood-work of the porch, and the general aspect of decay and desolation which pervaded the house and all that environed it. The black pool, with a solitary heron drinking—and how thirsty the herons are in water-colours!—would have been the very thing for Suffolk Street, Pall Mall. A member of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood might have made a good deal of those trackless depths of fern, and would most likely have been tempted to devote his chief strength to the broad fan-like leaves, the delicious gradations from tawny yellow to deep russet brown,

from tender emerald tints to sombre depths of darkest green and purple.

Artistically regarded, the Hermitage was perfection; but when considered as a residence for a gentleman and his servant, there might be some difference of opinion as to its merits. Of course Sir Jasper Denison's agent, a West-end auctioneer, who had never seen the place, described it in his advertisements as a small paradise, eminently suited to the requirements of the most fastidious bachelor living. The Hermitage had been for a long time vacant, and the auctioneer's advertisement had figured in the *Times* Supplement at intervals during the last twelve months, agreeably varied by some little artistic touch of colour in the description, so that its staleness should escape the detection of house-hunters. Bachelors with a taste for field-sports and retirement came to look at the Hermitage, and generally went away despondent. Half-pay officers in search of a cheap habitation, and prepared to endure a good deal in the way of damp and dulness, came to Roxborough puffed-up with

hope, and returned to London stricken down by despair. The damp and loneliness were something too much; the stone escutcheon on the gate was too suggestive of sweet Thomas Hood's Haunted House; the black pool and the splashing water-rats hinted *too* plainly at murders that had been done in the olden time; and the despondent house-hunter, stopping to refresh himself with a bottle of pale ale at the Scarsdale Arms, just outside the Park gates, was apt to hear one of the goriest versions of the story about the shrieking maniac and the duel to the death.

Thus it was that the Hermitage had been untenanted for nearly a year; except, indeed, by a deaf old woman, who lived on friendly terms with the rats and mice, and was supposed to keep the house in order. The last tenants had been some riotous young sportsmen, who had laughed damp and dulness, ghastly associations and shadowy suggestions, to scorn, and who had committed terrible havoc among Sir Jasper Denison's preserves; who had consumed half a dozen

bottles of French brandy in the space of a week, and had been more than once upon the very point of setting fire to the desirable shooting-box pleasantly situated in a gentleman's grounds. The riotous young sportsmen had clubbed together for the hire of a moor in Scotland this year, and for a long time it had seemed as if the Hermitage would stand empty all the winter. But one morning in October Sir Jasper's housekeeper had received a letter from the Baronet, then travelling in Italy with his only daughter and heiress Marcia Denison, to the effect that a tenant had been found for the Hermitage; a tenant who was to be expected by the afternoon express from London on the 15th of October; a very methodical kind of tenant, it would seem, since he had answered the auctioneer's advertisement from Marseilles, and had replied to the auctioneer's letter of particulars by definitely hiring the house, and announcing his arrival at Roxborough by a certain train upon a certain day. He had lately returned from Central Africa; his name was George Pauncefort; and the reference he

gave was to a highly respectable solicitor in Austin Friars.

Now the expected arrival of any tenant whatever at the Hermitage would have made subject-matter for discourse amongst Sir Jasper Denison's household, who found the long summer days and the long winter evenings hang very heavily on their hands during that weary period of board-wages and individual half-pounds of butter and isolated half-shoulders of mutton, and that general scragginess which distinguishes the arrangements of a gentleman's servants when they are cast upon their own resources, as compared with the noble liberality with which they dispense the goods provided by their master. Sir Jasper's servants, finding their lives very flat, stale, and unprofitable during the lengthened absence of the Baronet and his daughter, were glad to pounce upon any little conversational bone, and were not likely to drop it until the last shred of intellectual sustenance had been picked therefrom.

Any tenant at the Hermitage would have been a god-send; but a tenant who came direct from

the centre of Africa was an inestimable blessing in a conversational point of view. The questions that opened up out of such a circumstance could scarcely ever grow stale, for they were never likely to be answered. It was like the proverbial Peter Piper over again. A tenant come from Central Africa to take Sir Jasper's shooting-box; but did the tenant really come from Central Africa; and if the tenant did actually come from Central Africa, what was the all-powerful motive which had brought him from one side of the globe to the other to take Sir Jasper's shooting-box?

There were warm discussions every evening in the housekeeper's room as to the tenant, and the tenant's possible habits and probable motives. What he was likely to do, what he was sure not to do; what he was likely to be like, and what he was certain not to be like; were so many phases of the grand question freely debated in that little coterie: and by the time the week had worn its slow length along, and the day indicated by Sir Jasper had arrived, every

man and woman in the household at Scarsdale had created a separate ideal of the tenant who was to come to Roxborough by the 7.20 express.

Only one privileged creature was to enjoy the happiness of an early view of the voyager from Central Africa. This fortunate being was a groom, who, in accordance with Sir Jasper's wish that his new tenant should be treated with all possible courtesy, had been directed by the housekeeper to drive a certain four-wheel pony-carriage to the Roxborough station for the accommodation of the expected traveller. Unluckily, by that peculiar destiny which is perpetually planting the square men in the round holes, and *vice versâ*, the groom in question happened to be a person of a stolid temperament, quite unable to appreciate the privilege afforded him. He drove into Roxborough to meet the new tenant as coolly as he would have ridden to Roxborough to meet a draught-horse for the farm.

How was he to recognise the tenant? This question had been duly discussed. The town of Roxborough, and the military depot of Castle-

ford adjoining, were busy places, and there were likely to be many travellers by the 7.20 express. In this case it was decided that the groom must trust to his instincts, and be governed by circumstances. Besides, he would most probably be guided by the brownness of aspect which must inevitably distinguish a traveller newly arrived from Central Africa. The housekeeper's last instructions to the young man enjoined him to look out for a brown gentleman, attended by his servant, and provided with an unusual amount of luggage.

The young man checked off his instructions upon the stumpy ends of his fingers, and then drove stolidly away through that delicious forest-land which to the chance traveller seems one deep mystery of fern and underwood. He drove through the dark avenues of oak and elm towards the winding road by the Merdrid, across whose broad waters the walls of Roxborough Castle loomed grand and dusky in the sunset.

At twenty minutes past seven the shrill shriek of the engine cut the still evening air about the station. Of course the station at Roxborough

stood inconveniently away from the town, and seemed cast down haphazard amid a dreary stretch of waste and swamp. If it had been otherwise situated, it would scarcely have seemed a station.

The privileged groom, standing at his horse's head outside the door from which the passengers by the down-train must emerge, waited very patiently for his private view.

He was not such a very stupid young man, after all; and it may be he was rather wanting in the higher attributes of ideality and the reflective powers than in the perceptive faculty; for he made no mistake in the business intrusted to him. He waited for the brown gentleman, and the brown gentleman came—a tall muscular-looking man, with a railway-rug over his shoulder, and a small portmanteau in his hand; but entirely unattended.

The brown gentleman was walking off at a brisk pace, when the groom plunged a little way forward, touching his hat spasmodically in the endeavour to attract the stranger's attention.

"Sir Jasper Denison, sir," he said; "trap,

sir—horse and shay; drive you to the Hermitage if you please, sir; master's orders was every attention; and Mrs. Browning, she thought as how—"

"Oh, you've come to meet me," answered the stranger; "that's very kind and civil of your people. It's a long way then, I suppose, from here to the Hermitage?"

"A good four mile and a half, sir. Shall I take your portmanteau, sir?"

The small portmanteau was stowed into the phaeton, and the stranger took his place beside the groom.

The groom being constitutionally stolid—the stranger being habitually silent, very little was said during that four mile and a half drive. The traveller asked three questions: "Was Sir Jasper Denison at home?" "Would he be likely to come home yet awhile?" "Were there many country houses in the neighbourhood of Scarsdale?" When he spoke the tenant spoke very pleasantly, but very briefly. Having spoken, he relapsed into silence; and the groom observing him, as in

duty bound, saw that he was very brown, that he wore a thick moustache, a closely-cropped square beard; and that he made good use of a pair of dark eyes, which looked here, there, and every where through the dusk, observant of every changing feature in the rustic landscape.

The Hermitage looked absolutely cheerful to-night, for the deaf old woman had received orders from the great house, and had kindled big wood fires in the two most habitable rooms. The light of these fires gleamed redly through the diamond-paned casements, in pleasant contrast with the black October night.

"You'll want some one to wait upon you perhaps, sir, as your own man hasn't come yet," the groom said, as he alighted at the gate. "Shall I come back when I've put up the horse?"

The African traveller laughed pleasantly at this offer.

"My good fellow, you are very kind; but I have roughed it too long out yonder to be dependent on the services of a valet. My man comes down to-morrow with my luggage; till

then I want nothing but a fire and a light, a loaf of bread, and a cup of tea. There seems to be some one in the house by the look of it."

"Yes, sir; there's an old woman, Jim Turs-good the farm-bailiff's mother, very respectable, sir, but uncommon deaf."

"She'll be able to get me all I'm likely to ask for. Tell Sir Jasper Denison's housekeeper that I thank her for her civility in sending the phaeton. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and thank you, sir."

The stolid groom touched his hat and drove away; the richer for a halfcrown piece which the tenant had dropped into his hand, and very well content with the result of his errand. The tenant went into the Hermitage, upon whose fire-lit threshold the deaf old housekeeper bobbed perpetual curtsies.

The African traveller seated himself in a big old-fashioned arm-chair by the fire, and took off his hat, revealing a handsome, or perhaps rather a noble-looking head, crowned by a forest of short dark hair. He glanced round the low oak-paneled

room with a grave contemplative gaze, in which there was little of either curiosity or interest: and yet the place looked cheery and pleasant enough to-night, as such places will when seen in the luminous glow of blazing logs burning redly on a wide open hearth. The dark oaken wainscot, the queer old bureaus, with brazen locks and handles twinkling in the uncertain light; the eight-day clock ticking hoarsely in a shadowy corner; the old japan china jars, cracked so much and mended so often as to be reduced to a perfect patchwork of porcelain; the peacock's plumes and tiny Indian tea-cups on the high mantle-shelf; the grim arm-chairs and faded Turkey carpet; all these had a certain element of the picturesque even in their ugliness; and a traveller who had slept under canvas, upon the stony plateau of the Hammada, might consider himself very well off in the common sitting-room of the Hermitage.

After that long contemplative stare Mr. Pauncefort took a bunch of keys from his waistcoat-pocket, and opened the small portmanteau,

which he had flung on the table near him. It was a shabby little portmanteau; scratched, and grazed, and torn, and battered, and was adorned more or less with the labels of almost every railway company in Europe. From this portmanteau Mr. Pauncefort produced a tin-canister, a meerschaum-pipe, and a packet of tea. The old woman asked if there was any thing she could get for the gentleman. Nothing but a tea-pot, some boiling water, and a cup and saucer, Mr. Pauncefort told her briefly.

She departed to remote regions at the back of the Hermitage, and returned presently with the stereotyped tea-tray, a big loaf, a pound or so of butter, and a tea-kettle, which she set upon the red logs,—a sputtering, hissing, blustering kettle, the voice whereof sounded pleasant in the fire-lit chamber. Then the old dame demanded with many curtsies if there was any thing more she could do? She was very anxious to be retained by the strange gentleman. Her services generally went along with the cottage; and she had an agreeable recollection of the wild young

bachelors of the last year, who had left their brandy-bottles in cupboards undefended by locks, and had never been quite certain whether their housekeeper was in a state of chronic intoxication during the entire period of their residence, or whether it was the old woman's normal condition to be very hazy in her intellect and rather unsteady on her legs.

Sir Jasper's tenant, being left to himself, made his tea, after a manner that smacked rather of foreign travel than of domestic habits. He took a great handful of the raw material and dropped it into the teapot, which he filled with boiling water, and then set down among the feathery ashes on the broad stone hearth. Then he filled and lighted his black-muzzled friend the meerschaum, and sat for a long time blowing big clouds of smoke, and staring dreamily at the red logs, which changed to a deeper glow, and then grew dim, only spitting out little jets of blue-and-yellow flame now and then as they broke and smouldered into a mass of frail gray ash.

What is he like, the Tenant? seen now vividly,

now very dimly by that fitful light. What is he like? and is there any special charm about him whereby we can be expected to be interested in him as he sits moodily smoking the big black meerschaum, and staring at the fading fire?

He is not handsome, not in the common acceptation of the word, which I suppose involves something like perfection of form and colour. He has strong features, boldly cut; deep thoughtful eyes, darkly brown or darkly gray; it is not easy to discover their precise hue in this uncertain light. There is some touch of melancholy in the exceeding gravity of the face, a sombre settled shadow, which makes the man seem older than he is. You guess his age to be something between thirty-five and forty; but you know instinctively that he looks older than he should look, and that any lines lurking here and there about his face have been sharply and suddenly cut by the cruel hand of care, and not gently pencilled by the gradual touch of time.

He laid aside his pipe by and by, and poured out his tea; strong black stuff, such as Hazlitt

the critical was wont to brew for himself. Mr. Pauncefort poured the black fluid into a basin, and drank it without any alien accompaniment of milk or sugar.

It was late by the time he had finished the black decoction, and the old woman came in to ask if he wanted any thing more. No, nothing more.

"My bedroom is overhead, I suppose?" Mr. Pauncefort inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you can go to bed when you please."

Mrs. Tursgood curtsied and retired to the unknown regions appropriated to her. The tenant filled and lighted his meerschaum for the second time, stirred the pallid logs into a faint blaze with the toe of his boot, and threw a heap of fresh wood on the hearth. The hands of the hoarse clock in the corner pointed to half-past ten; but Mr. Pauncefort had evidently no intention of going to bed yet awhile. You cannot expect an African explorer to be tired by a journey from London to Roxborough.

He opened the casement-window and looked out into the quiet woods. The moon had risen, a young pale moon as yet, but old enough to give a faint silvery light, beneath which the silent woods, the still black pool, the glorious depths of tangled fern, appeared mysteriously beautiful. Sir Jasper's tenant dropped into a chair that was set against the window, rested his folded arms upon the sill, and sat thus for a long time motionless, absorbed, looking straight before him, with a solemn melancholy in his face.

"An English wood," he murmured at last, "English ferns and English foliage. How beautiful, how unutterably beautiful it all seems to me after the rank luxuriance of the tropics, the burning barrenness of the desert, the gigantic horror of African mountains under an African sky! Fifteen years—fifteen wearisome useless years since I last set my foot upon this English land, and I have the courage to come back at last. I sometimes think it was a presentiment that must have prompted my coming. *Mourir au gîte*, says the old proverb. I have seen the bones

of travellers bleaching amongst the yellow sand, and I should scarcely have cared to die in Africa. I should like best to lie under a wooden cross in a rustic churchyard, with the shadow of a solemn old yew for ever on my breast, and the sonorous peal of village-bells for my Sabbath lullaby."

CHAPTER II.

UP AT THE GREAT HOUSE.

The tenant's servant arrived at the Hermitage early the next day in a Roxborough fly, that was heavily laden with luggage. Other luggage was to come in the course of the day; cases of books, and a bath, and trunks, and portmanteaus of all kinds. Mr. Pauncefort evidently intended to establish himself for some time at the Hermitage. The servant was brown like his master, and grave like his master, and about the same age as his master; but there ended all resemblance between the two. The servant, though ordinarily reserved in speech and manner, could relax upon occasion, and reveal a cheerful, not to say jovial temperament; and this the master never did. If Mr. Pauncefort smiled, his smile was evidently the smile of courtesy, and took no radiance from

any light within the man. A very superficial observer might have discovered that some one great sorrow had given a gloomy colour to the character of the grave and silent gentleman who had newly taken possession of Sir Jasper's shooting-box; but George Pauncefort was the very last amongst creation to parade his feelings or sentiments before the eyes of his fellow men. He affected none of the stereotyped gruffness and brutality of the misanthrope. He gave himself none of those disagreeable airs, familiar to the playgoing public, in the person of Mrs. Haller's ill-used and weak-minded husband. He was only very quiet, very anxious to avoid all notice, and to live his own life unobserved and solitary. The dreariness of the Hermitage, before which so many would-be tenants had fled despairing, was an attraction for this man. Established in the low old-fashioned parlour, with his cases of books unpacked, and the dusky brown-backed volumes ranged on neat shelves fitted and fixed by a Roxborough carpenter; provided with a perpetual supply of pale Turkish tobacco, and that friend

and familiar the black-muzzled meerschaum, Sir Jasper's tenant seemed perfectly comfortable. "The heart may break, yet brokenly live on," exclaims that poet who so dearly loved to make the most of all woes, real and imaginary; and who never so thoroughly enjoyed himself as when he was tearing the bandages off his freshest heart-wounds for the edification of the reading world. "The heart may break," and yet a man may eat his dinner, and smoke his pipe, and sleep soundly o' nights, only disturbed now and then by some broken dream in which he feels the touch of the vanished hand, and hears the voice that is still. The heart may break, and the man may hold his own in the world. Those are not the least useful, or the least agreeable members of society whose hearts are broken. The great main-spring is shivered for ever, but all the little wheels go on. The one pure joy, which made life worth living for, has vanished into outer darkness; but there are low sensuous pleasures, fine houses, and delicate wines, and Chelsea china; and if the man with the broken heart has only a sufficient balance

at his banker's, he may turn collector, and give his mind to Dutch pictures or Queen-Anne teapots, as the case may be. Henry I. of England never was seen to smile after the wreck which lost him his son and heir; but the faithful historian who tells us this, tells us also that the bereaved king died of a surfeit of lampreys.

Mr. George Pauncefort, always grave and quiet, was yet sufficiently genial in his manner towards those few people whom he encountered in his simple and solitary existence. The gossips who speculated about him were unanimous in declaring that he was "quite the gentleman," "one of y'r regular thorough-bred uns," according to the horsey members of Sir Jasper Denison's establishment.

Mr. Pauncefort had been for many months a tenant of the rustic little habitation in the wood, before he crossed the threshold of that splendid mansion whose Tudor chimneys glimmered redly across the park. He had carefully avoided the neighbourhood of the great house, preferring to take his solitary rambles deep in the heart of

the wood, where few but poachers or keepers ever strayed; or far away in the pleasant open country. But when he had been some eight months in possession of the Hermitage, a certain matter of business took him to Scarsdale Abbey. It was the simplest matter, and one that his servant could have easily transacted for him. But George Pauncefort was one of those men who have a habit of waiting upon themselves, while their pampered retainers enjoy an elegant idleness. He had gone far afield upon this day, and in striking out his own road homewards across the park, which was always open to him, he came very close to the front of the Abbey.

It was then that he remembered that he had been for the last day or two hindered from writing to Sir Jasper Denison, to demand permission to make some trifling alterations in the stabling behind the Hermitage, by the want of that gentleman's address.

The grand portico entrance of the house was some distance from him, but there was an old-fashioned little door in a turret at one end of the

building, very near the spot where Mr. Pauncefort stopped to contemplate the mansion. This door was open, and a portly, rosy-cheeked gray-haired woman, who wore a silk gown and a prim white muslin cap and apron, was standing in the doorway, talking to a groom and caressing an enormous dog of the Mount St. Bernard breed. This woman was no less a person than Mrs. Browning, Sir Jasper Denison's housekeeper.

Mr. Pauncefort walked straight to the little doorway, and speedily obtained all necessary information about the Baronet's probable address; but he did not find it very easy to escape from Mrs. Browning's society. She had never before had a good view of Sir Jasper's tenant; and she was determined to make the most of her opportunity. Would he not like to see the Abbey, she asked. People came hundreds of miles to see the Abbey. There wasn't a creature in the county who had not seen it; and this being a nice bright day, with a good light for the pictures, how could the gentleman better employ

himself than by inspecting the Vandyke gallery, and the Reynolds dining-room?

This, or something very much to this effect, Mrs. Browning demanded with considerable earnestness and animation.

"Lor, now, to think of your being the best half of a year living at Scarsdale, next door to us as one may say, and never coming to see the Abbey; and it one of the show-places of the county too! I suppose it's through having been so long abroad, sir, that you don't seem to take any interest, I daresay, in English scenery, and English houses, and such like."

The housekeeper said this in quite a sympathetic tone, as if she were able to imagine a certain state of feeling in which show-houses and show-pictures might become indifferent to the mind satiated with foreign splendours and foreign art.

Mr. Pauncefort sighed as he answered her.

"No," he said; "I am very fond of England. Nothing that I have ever seen elsewhere, nor any

length of absence, have weakened my love for my native country."

He spoke slowly; rather like a person who is thinking aloud, than like one who answers an ordinary question. His thoughts seemed to wander away as he spoke; and for some moments he looked absently across the sunlit park, with the same sombre shadow on his face that had darkened it when he looked out on the moonlit woodland on the night of his first coming to Scarsdale.

The housekeeper watched him inquisitively. There was so much about him to afford material for speculation, and she was so anxious to make the most of her opportunity.

"Then you *will* step in and look at the pictures?" she said presently.

Mr. Pauncefort hesitated a moment, and then replied with a half-indifferent shrug of his shoulders: "Yes, if you are really so good as to wish to show them to me. I have no doubt they are very well worth seeing."

That indifferent consent was enough. Mrs.

Browning curtsied; and George Pauncefort crossed the threshold of a house which he had hitherto scrupulously avoided, and which he had intended to avoid to the end of his tenancy of the Hermitage.

Mr. Pauncefort submitted very patiently to the usual ordeal to be undergone by the inquiring individual who inspects a show mansion. Mrs. Browning pelted him with that little hail-storm of hard facts which the cicerone lets down upon his or her victims. The Vandykes, in a long gallery at one end of the Abbey, were no doubt very fine; the Florentine mosaics, the huge Indian vases, were of course worthy of Mrs. Browning's encomiums; but the only thing George Pauncefort lingered long to look at in any of the grand apartments was a little Dutch interior, hanging in a badly-lighted corner of the paneled drawing-room.

They came out of this drawing-room into the great marble-paved hall—a splendid but very chilly-looking apartment, with a domed ceiling painted by Lely; and with gigantic

equestrian portraits of dead-and-gone warriors looming forth gloomily from the walls. Swinging doors of massive plate-glass opened from this hall into the portico; and by one of these doors Mr. Pauncefort would fain have made his exit, after presenting a very handsome fee to the housekeeper; but that lady was bent upon detaining him still longer.

"You haven't seen half the house yet, sir," she said; "or not more than half of it, anyhow. You've only seen what Miss Denison calls the historical end of the Abbey. Some of the best of the pictures are in the private apartments, which are never shown to strangers; but I shall be happy to show them to you, sir, not being a stranger, as one may say."

Again George Pauncefort hesitated; and again gave way. A man's will in regard to the trifles of life generally bends beneath a woman's, be she whom she may. It matters so little, he fancies, which way so small a matter is decided; and it is by granting her sovereignty over these little matters that we allow woman

to rule the universe. Only let Jeanne du Barri sit upon the arm of King Louis's chair, and pull his wig awry, and presently you will have Choiseul sent away into exile, and all France disorganised for the pleasure of a plebeian favourite.

Again Mr. Pauncefort shrugged his shoulders, and followed Sir Jasper's housekeeper whithersoever she chose to lead him. She opened a pair of baize doors, and led the way into a long and spacious corridor, where the light from a broad tudor window at the extreme end was made dimly splendid by the gorgeous colouring of the arms emblazoned on every alternate pane of glass. The window was built in a deep recess, on each side of which there were quaint old cabinets filled with oriental china, and surmounted by hugh mandarin jars. A pair of old-fashioned arm-chairs with slim legs and stiff straight backs, and a chess-table with a set of carved ivory pieces ranged under a glass shade, stood in the window; and it was very easy to fancy a cavalier with love-locks falling

loosely on a point-lace collar and velvet jerkin, and a lady of the E. M. Ward school, bending over the chessboard in the rainbow-tinted splendour of summer sunshine streaming through the old window. It was a charming spot, the very scene of all others for a quiet flirtation on a summer's morning, or for more earnest converse in the mysterious glimmer of moonlight, shining with fantastic glory on the polished oaken floors and wainscots. It was a spot in which a lover's voice would sink instinctively to a whisper; a spot in which a sublime unconsciousness of all the past and a perfect recklessness as to all the future were apt to creep into a man's mind, leaving only a delicious sense of present enjoyment; a delightful resting-place upon the weary highway of life; a sunny oasis where it seemed "always afternoon," and summer afternoon, perfumed with the mingled odour of ripe apricots and clematis floating through an open casement.

The tudor window overlooked a walled flower-garden. Miss Denison's garden it was

called; an old-fashioned unpretending pleasaunce, with prim parterres bounded by overgrown box borders; a garden that was rich in roses and honeysuckle, and all simple flowers; in rare old fruit-trees that stretched their gnarled limbs wide and far upon such a wall as builders rarely fashion nowadays; a wall propped up by solid bastions of brickwork, but which seemed notwithstanding to have been slipping down into the earth for the last century; a lop-sided top-heavy old wall, about which gray mosses and creeping things clung tenderly, while foxgloves and stonecrop crowned it with flaunting crests of red and yellow.

Looking through a small opening in the tudor window, Mr. Pauncefort seemed more attracted by the quaint old flower-garden, where the yellow butterflies were wheeling above the roses, and where a big lazy bee made a monotonous booming in the cup of a tall white lily, than he had been by any of the catalogued grandeurs on the other side of the Abbey.

"It's a queer old-fashioned place," Mrs.

Browning said, almost contemptuously, "but Miss Marcia won't allow any alteration; not so much as the transplanting of a rose-bush; it was her ma's favourite garden, and Miss Marcia seems to cling to every thing that was in any way connected with her ma."

"You spoke of Miss Denison just now," observed Mr. Pauncefort, still looking out into the sunlit garden; "and now you speak of Miss Marcia. Are there two Miss Denisons?"

"Not now, sir. There was another Miss Denison, but she died. She was a very beautiful young person; not so clever perhaps as Miss Marcia, but much handsomer, and more aristocratic like, quite a queen she looked; but you'll see her picture in Sir Jasper's study, so I needn't say any thing about that. She was engaged to be married to Mr. Percival Mannering, of Stoke Mannering, one of the wealthiest gentlemen in the county; but her horse took fright one day on the Roxborough Road and ran away with her. She wasn't as good a horsewoman as Miss Marcia, but she had a fancy for spirited horses, and I've

heard the grooms say this one was a regular brute. He threw her on a heap of stones that were lying on the side of the road. She was brought home to the Abbey, and before midnight there were five doctors standing round her bed. But she never spoke again, nor knew any one, and she died the next evening just as it was growing dark."

"A terrible calamity for her father."

"It was indeed a calamity, sir. He was just like a madman. I was standing in the room when Miss Denison died. Sir Jasper was kneeling by the bed holding both her hands, as if he was trying to hold her back from death, somehow, by the force of his own will. I never, in all my life before, heard any thing like the shriek he gave when the poor girl, who had been wrestling and struggling like in her agony, fell back upon the pillows dead. It was one of those sort of things you can never get out of your head. Sir Jasper is rather a stern, proud gentleman, not given to express his feelings much about any thing; but he was wrapt up in his eldest daughter."

"And how long has Miss Denison been dead?"

"Nearly five years. Sir Jasper left the Abbey directly after the funeral, and he has never been back since. I sometimes think he never will come back again. I never saw any one so changed as he was in that one week after his daughter's death. She was just coming of age, and her birthday would have fallen about a month after the accident. There were going to be all manner of fine doings at the Abbey; for it had been settled that she should be married on her birthday, and both events were to be celebrated at once. There was nothing too grand or too good for Miss Denison; and Sir Jasper spent as much money and took as much trouble about all the arrangements, as if he'd been going to receive a visit from the Queen of England. If any thing could make the poor dear's death seem more sad, it was the fact of its happening amidst all the bustle of these grand preparations. Sir Jasper sent for me into his study the night Miss Denison died, and gave me his orders about her rooms.

They were to be kept just as she had left them. Nothing was to be moved—not a book, nor a scrap of needlework, nor any thing that her hand had ever touched; the flowers in the vases on the tables and mantelpieces were to be left to wither away; the music was to remain as she had left it, scattered about the piano. He took me with him, and went into her sitting-room and dressing-room. I never shall forget his face as he looked round the rooms. I'm sure I don't know *why* it should be so, but I know that the sight of an open book with a cambric handkerchief lying across it, just as it had been dropped there carelessly before she went out, *did* make it seem harder to believe that she was dead and gone from us for ever. Sir Jasper shut and barred all the shutters with his own hands, and then he locked the doors of both the rooms, and gave me the keys. The doors were never to be opened unless there was a necessity for the opening of them. There was to be no dusting, or cleaning, or meddling with them in any way; and there never has been. No one has ever been

into those rooms but me; and I'm sure when I do go there I always feel as if I was in a grave, and expect to see Miss Denison's white face looking at me out of the dusk at every turn."

"But the other young lady,—Miss Marcia I think you called her,—she must have been a great comfort to her father in his affliction," observed Mr. Pauncefort. He was in an idle humour this hot summer afternoon, and inclined to be interested in the history of Sir Jasper's family. That listener must have a very hard nature who does not feel some touch of sadly tender interest in a story of youth and beauty suddenly blighted by the relentless hand of death The housekeeper raised her eyebrows with a dubious expression. Whatever Mrs. Browning might have been in the days when the Abbey was fully tenanted, and her own time fully occupied by domestic duties, she was now an incorrigible gossip, and would have been content to stand for an hour together in the sunlit corridor, discoursing about the absent family.

"As for Miss Marcia being a comfort to our

master," she said, sinking her voice to a confidential tone, "I don't know about that. I can't take upon myself to say whether she would, or whether she wouldn't. You see the truth of the matter is, Sir Jasper did *not* seem to take to Miss Marcia. He married twice, as I daresay you may have heard; and those that know him best do say that he married the first time for love, and the second time for money. The second Lady Denison was a Miss Jones, a very rich young lady; but her father was something in the City, and the county families wondered at Sir Jasper's making such a match. The first Lady Denison was one of the Hetheringtons of Castle Hetherington, a very high family. She was a beautiful young creature, but she was the youngest of nine, and she hadn't a sixpence to bless herself with. She died a fortnight after her first baby was born; and from the hour of the child's birth—or I should say from the hour of the mother's death—Sir Jasper seemed to act as if his daughter Evelyn was the only creature he cared for on this earth. He married Miss Jones two years after his first

wife's death. She was a gentle, pleasant-spoken lady, not one of your regular beauties, but very sweet-looking, with mild timid ways, just as if she felt herself out of place in this great house. I don't say that Sir Jasper was unkind to her; for my master is quite the gentleman, and I don't think he'd be unkind to any one. It seemed more as if he overlooked her like, almost as if he *couldn't* bring himself to think of her, or pay much attention to her, he was so wrapped-up in his little daughter. Anyhow the poor lady wasn't happy. She didn't cry, or fret, or complain, or any thing of that kind; and I've heard the men-servants say that she always smiled and seemed to light up like when Sir Jasper talked to her; but she faded away very, very slowly; so slowly that no one was frightened about the change in her looks, or the feebleness that grew upon her as the time went by. Her baby was born a year and a half after her marriage; and oh, dear, how she did cling to that baby! But I think her greatest grief came upon her at the birth of that child, for she couldn't help seeing that

Sir Jasper didn't care for it. It was nearly three years afterwards when she was lying on her deathbed, very ill and very feeble, but mild and patient and gentle to the last. It was just a few days before she died, that I heard her say to my master as he sat by her side, 'I should like to see you kiss my little girl, Sir Jasper, if it was only once in all your life; let me see my darling in her father's arms this once before I die.' Sir Jasper gave a little start like, and took his youngest daughter on his knee. I do believe it was the first time he had ever held her in his arms from the hour of her birth."

"But I suppose Sir Jasper was sorry when this poor neglected wife died!"

Mrs. Browning shook her head thoughtfully.

"He seemed more stunned and dazed like, than sorry," she said. "Lady Denison's death came upon him very sudden, for he never seemed to have seen that she was seriously ailing. It was only common for the family-doctor to be hanging about the house, first to see one of the children, and then to see the other; and though

he'd been attending Lady Denison for the three years after her baby's birth off and on, she was so quiet and made so little complaint, that scarcely any one knew that there was any thing amiss with her. *I* knew; for my lady was very friendly with me, and would ask me to sit down sometimes when I went to her room to consult her about any thing, and would keep me talking for an hour at a stretch. 'Dr. Daniel tells me there is nothing really the matter,' she would say to me; 'he says there is only want of tone.' I couldn't help thinking that Sir Jasper would take more to Miss Marcia after her poor mother's death: but he didn't; he only seemed to get more and more wrapped up in Miss Evelyn. I'd been many years in his service, and I'd served his father before him, so he used to speak very freely to me. 'I'm a most unfortunate wretch, Browning,' he said to me one day after the second Lady Denison's death; 'and every thing that I love seems to come to an evil end.' His daughter Evelyn was standing by his side as he spoke, and he put his hand upon her

head and lifted up her face. I never shall forget the look he gave her. He didn't speak another word; but I know as well as if I'd been able to read his thoughts, that from that time there was always a fear in his mind that his eldest daughter would die. He kept her with him for one-and-twenty years, and he seemed to grow fonder of her every year: and just when she was dearest to him he lost her. There are some of our folks wicked enough to say that her death was a judgment upon him for his treatment of Miss Marcia."

"Did he treat his younger daughter badly, then?"

"Oh, dear no, sir. He only seemed to overlook her somehow, just as he'd overlooked her poor mother. He never spoke unkindly to her, but she might be in the room with him for an hour together without his speaking to her at all. I had a good deal to do with the management of the two children, and their nurses and governesses and masters, and suchlike, and in all the time I can't remember any one act of

Sir Jasper's that you could call unkind. If he was ordering any thing particular for Miss Evelyn, he seemed to forget her sister; but if I said to him, 'And Miss Marcia, sir?' he would answer directly, 'Yes, of course; let Marcia have every thing that is proper: that is understood.'"

"And did the little girl feel her father's want of affection?"

"I think she did, sir. She was very quiet, but not timid, like her mother; rather proud and independent like in her ways; fond of waiting upon herself, and not caring to take a favour from any body. She was very fond of her sister, and would always give way to her in every thing, and had a kind of protecting manner with her, as if she'd been the elder sister instead of Miss Evelyn. Poor Miss Evelyn was a regular spoilt child to the very last, and it seemed sometimes as if she couldn't move hand or foot without her sister's help. Marcia was not more than seventeen when Miss Denison died, but she was more a woman than her sister for all that; and when the accident came, and Sir Jasper was

like a madman, and there was scarcely any one in the house fit to do any thing, the doctors said that if Miss Marcia had been a hospital-nurse of fifty years old, she could hardly have done better than she did. But goodness gracious me, sir, I might keep you here all day talking like this, and I'm sure I beg your pardon for running on so; only when an old woman begins to talk of a family that she's lived with for nearly forty years of her life, you can't wonder if she finds plenty to say."

The grave dark face of Sir Jasper's tenant betrayed no weariness. He was interested in this every-day story of a slighted childhood, and a noble womanly nature poorly appreciated by those who should have held it the dearest of all earthly treasures.

It seemed as if in every corner of the world, for ever and for ever, quiet sufferers were bearing their burdens meekly and silently. "Ah, what a sorrowful universe it is!" thought Sir Jasper's tenant; "forgotten wretches starving silently in loathsome garrets and cellars; beau-

tiful women stricken by sudden death in splendid mansions, and all the power of wealth and science too weak to save them; passionate love unable to shelter the object of its devotion; and even a child, an innocent unoffending child, born with the stamp of a sorrowful destiny upon her, and called upon from the cradle to bear her small part in the universal drama of suffering!"

"I should like very much to see Miss Marcia Denison's picture," Mr. Pauncefort said presently.

The housekeeper looked at him doubtfully.

"It was Miss Evelyn's picture I spoke of, sir," she replied; "Miss Evelyn was the beauty, and her portrait hangs in Sir Jasper's study. It was painted by a very celebrated artist, I believe, though the name has slipped my memory."

"But there is a portrait of Miss Marcia somewhere, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know, sir; and yet, when I come to think of it, there *is* a portrait painted by Miss Marcia herself. It hangs in the room that used to be the young ladies' school-room,

and that was afterwards Miss Marcia's own sitting-room. She was always very clever with her pencil, and used to spend the best part of her time in drawing, and writing, and reading. Her sister used to call her a blue-stocking; for, you see, the two young ladies were so different, Miss Denison being all for gaiety and pleasure, and Miss Marcia all for study and loneliness."

"I should like to see Miss Marcia's picture."

"Yes, sir; but you'll see Miss Denison's portrait first, won't you? It's considered a very fine painting, let alone being such a good likeness."

Mr. Pauncefort assented: and the housekeeper conducted him to Sir Jasper's study,—a noble room, lined with books from floor to ceiling, and fragrant with the odour of Russia leather; rather a severe-looking apartment altogether, with two white-marble busts on massive black-marble pedestals keeping guard over the door, and a bronze Neptune sitting grim and stern above a group of fierce sea-horses on the top of the solemn-faced clock, which formed

the sole ornament on the broad marble chimney-piece.

Above this bronze Neptune hung the only picture in the room,—a portrait, in kit-cat size, of a very beautiful young woman, with a perfect profile and large dark eyes, but with something of the gorgeous colouring and classic regularity of feature which have become vulgarised by a hundred different examples of the same young woman; now caressing a dove, and labelled Amanda; now smirking above a sleeping baby, and entitled Maternal Affection; anon simpering under the shadow of oriental head-gear, and dubbed Zuleika: but always equally adorned with all the splendour of dark eyes, glowing cheeks, pouting lips, and a straight nose.

Evelyn Denison's portrait was the picture of a beautiful woman; but not an exceptional woman. Beatrice Cenci looks at us out of a square of painted canvas across half-a-dozen centuries, and we believe in her and pity her, and her rare beauty makes an image in our minds

that never melts or mingles with any other image; but there are pictures of lovelier women than Beatrice, which fade away from our memories five minutes after we turn from the wall on which they hang.

"Miss Denison must have been a very beautiful girl," said George Pauncefort; "but I fancy she was one of those people who are born to have love wasted on them by higher natures than their own. I should like to see Miss Marcia's portrait."

This was the third time Mr. Pauncefort had expressed the same desire. He was interested in the story of the daughter who had not been loved. Perhaps the dull monotony of his own life rendered him peculiarly liable to feel such an interest. Those who try to reverse the natural order of things must be content to pay some penalty for their presumption. If Canute had been in earnest when he asked the tides of ocean to retire from that Southampton shore, and the waves *had* obeyed him, they would most likely have recoiled only to return with a

mightier rush and drown him. The hermit who withdraws his sympathy from his fellow-men very frequently ends by devoting himself to the study of spiders and caterpillars. Mr. Paunce-fort, who had for eight months studiously avoided all communication with his neighbours, found himself all at once wasting a midsummer day in listening to the rambling talk of an old woman.

He was not to see Marcia Denison's portrait yet awhile. Mrs. Browning insisted upon taking him through the blue drawing-room and the amber drawing-room, the billiard-room and my lady's boudoir, still called by my lady's name, though the Baronet had been nearly twenty years a widower; and it was some time before she brought him to a room on the upper story, a large sunny room opening out of a wide gallery, and simply furnished with maple-wood chairs and tables, and chintz-hangings.

This was Miss Marcia's room. It looked like the apartment of a woman of thirty, rather than a girl of seventeen. Two capacious book-

cases were filled with books of no common or frivolous character. There were an easel and a pile of folio volumes in one corner of the room, and a little old-fashioned rosewood piano in another. The walls on three sides of the room were hung with maps, which had formed a part of the schoolroom furniture; but the wall above the mantelpiece was adorned by a great many water-coloured sketches, all evidently the work of the same hand.

The hand was not perhaps that of a genius; but it was that of a person gifted with a strong natural talent, which had been very fairly cultivated. There were vigour and grace in the drawing of the sketches; and, if the colouring was a little tame and cold, a shade conventional, it was at least free from the glaring hideousness which pervades the work of some amateur artists who aspire to follow in the footsteps of Etty.

The sketches were chiefly portraits. There was the picture of a man of about five-and-forty, with an aquiline nose and dark hair, just a little

sprinkled with gray, whom Mr. Pauncefort set down as Sir Jasper Denison. There were several sketches of the Baronet's elder daughter: now a three-quarter face, radiant and smiling, crowned with a wreath of flowers; now a profile with the large dark eye glancing coquettishly upwards from under the shadow of an elegant bonnet; now a full face beaming under a broad Spanish riding-hat and a plume of cock's-feathers. No one looking at these girlish pictures could well fail to understand that Marcia Denison had been very fond of her sister. It seemed as if she had never lost any opportunity of glorifying the dead girl's beauty; and every one of the sketches bore in its careful manipulation and finished colouring the evidence that the work had been a labour of love.

There was one profile very differently handled: the merest sketch, with only a little colour to light it up here and there; but, like most careless sketches, instinct with a life and vigour which had been lost in the more finished pictures. This little sketch was Marcia Denison's portrait,

drawn by her own hand. George Pauncefort looked at the simple little picture with a pensive interest. It was not the portrait of a beautiful girl; but Sir Jasper Denison's younger daughter possessed that which was wanting in the face of her handsome sister—a special character, by which it might be distinguished from the faces of all other women. It was a pale face, with a delicate little aquiline nose; a small but rather prominent chin; a broad forehead, with the hair growing rather low upon it; and dark gray eyes. The hair was a warm brown, rippling at the temple, and pushed away from the small ear. The outline of the cheek was very perfect, but its colouring cold and pale. One of the greatest charms of the sketch was the bend of the long slender throat, like the drooping curve of a wild hyacinth. In the attitude of the small head, and the expression of the thin lower lip, there lurked a quiet melancholy, which would have revealed itself to Mr. Pauncefort even if he had not known so much of Marcia Denison's history.

"I like her face better than her sister's," he said, as he turned away from the chimney-piece.

"Dear me, sir," cried Mrs. Browning; "you're the first person I ever heard say such a thing. We none of us ever thought Miss Marcia a beauty."

Mr. Pauncefort smiled.

"I didn't say I thought her a beauty," he said; "I only said I like her face. One doesn't always like the beautiful faces best. Miss Denison is the sort of woman a man marries on the same principle as that on which he buys a pair of carriage-horses, or the lease of a big house in Tyburnia—simply because the wife, or the horseflesh, or the house, may be the very best and most splendid of its kind. Miss Marcia Denison is a woman who may go down to her grave unwooed and unwedded, or she may meet the one man on all the earth destined to love her to distraction. You may take my word for it, Mrs. Browning, if any man ever does fall in love with that girl, her influence will hold him to the last hour of his life."

Mr. Pauncefort laughed at his own earnestness as he finished this speech.

"I did not think it was in me to be so much interested in any thing as I have been in your family history," he said; "I really have to thank you for a very pleasant morning."

The housekeeper curtsied and simpered:

"I'm sure I'm very glad you've been amused, sir; and I hope we shall see you often at the Abbey when the family comes home," she said, glancing rather doubtfully at Mr. Pauncefort's shabby shooting-jacket, and wondering whether he possessed a dress-coat in which to appear before the magnates of the land.

"O! the family is coming home, then?" said George Pauncefort, evidently surprised.

"Well, sir, Sir Jasper did say in his last letter that he should be back at the Abbey before Christmas; but he said the same thing the year before last, and he didn't come. He spent last winter and the spring in Rome; and now he's in Germany, drinking the waters somewhere;

but there, I always forget the names of these foreign places."

"And he is likely to return before Christmas?"

"Well, you see, he says so, sir, in his last letter."

Sir Jasper's tenant was very thoughtful as he walked slowly homeward across the sunlit greensward of the park, and through the dusky gloom of the thick woods. He had loitered for nearly three hours in the rooms and corridors of the Abbey, looking at the pictures and listening to the housekeeper's rambling talk.

"Humph!" he muttered; "if these people come back, I must find another hiding-place. I don't want to be patronised by Sir Jasper Denison, or stared at by Miss Marcia's young-lady visitors. *She* would neither stare at me, nor pry into my business. She is a self-contained young lady, who asks sympathy from no one, and will sympathise with very few. Between the story of her life and the little sketch of her

profile I fancy I can make out a pretty clear idea of that young lady's character."

The daily papers were lying on a table when he entered his sitting-room at the Hermitage. He had been fifteen years a wanderer in the wildest and loneliest regions of this earth; but in all those years he had never lost the Englishman's imperishable love of his daily newspaper. Even to-day, when his mind was occupied by forebodings of possible annoyance from the return of his landlord's family, he took up one of the papers with a greater show of eagerness than he was wont to exhibit.

The first paper which his hand fell upon was the Supplement to the *Times*. His eye ran along the list of births, marriages, and deaths, as if, hermit though he was, some slight interest in the affairs of his fellow-men still lingered in his breast. At the sight of a name among the record of deaths, a dark change came over his face, and a sudden shivering shook him from head to heel.

"On the 4th inst., at Naples, Leonora Fane,

relict of the late Major Weldon Paget Fane, H.E.I.C.S., aged 41."

George Pauncefort crushed the newspaper in his strong hand, as if in that iron grasp he would fain have crushed out the record on the printed sheet. "If it had been the other," he cried, — "*if* it had been the other! O my God, will the wicked wish never be granted?"

CHAPTER III.

WAS HE WISE?

THE summer waned slowly, very slowly for that quiet dweller in Scarsdale Hermitage, whose monotonous days were unbroken by any event, almost unvaried by so much as a communication from the outer world.

Those who took care to keep themselves well acquainted with George Pauncefort's habits were aware that he received scarcely any letters. The man who carried letters and papers to the big house rarely went out of his way to penetrate the thickets amongst which Mr. Pauncefort's retreat lay hidden. The newspapers were duly sent from Roxborough station every afternoon, and by their means alone was Sir Jasper's tenant made acquainted with the great political tempests and the small social ripples on the tide of human

life. He was not a talking man. His servant had travelled with him for fifteen years, sleeping in the same tent with him in the desert, resting with him by lonely wells under the shadow of African mountains, sharing dangers from man and beast; and yet there was little confidence or familiarity between the master and man. The servant kept his place as well as if he and his employer had never quitted Belgravia. He was a model retainer, a Protean domestic, entirely free from the pretentious cleverness, the bustling activity, common to your Jack of all trades. He could cook a dinner, or groom a horse, or lay-out the paraphernalia of his master's toilet, with equal despatch and completeness: but his service at the Hermitage was a very easy one, for Mr. Pauncefort's habits were almost as simple as those of an anchorite, and he had an absolute aversion to any thing in the way of obsequious attention. Indeed, to sit late into the solemn quiet of the chill hours that follow midnight, reading in heavy brown-backed folios or quaint black-letter volumes; to smoke bowl after bowl of

Turkish tobacco in the black-muzzled meerschaum, —seemed Mr. Pauncefort's only idea of domestic enjoyment. His days he spent in rambling far and wide about the fair pastoral country, utterly reckless of, and indifferent to, the changes in the weather, seeking out hidden nooks and world-forgotten villages, dotted on broad masses of common land, or lying deep under a cluster of towering hills. Sometimes, after wandering very far afield, he would take a night's shelter in some remote village inn, little better than a beershop as to its capacity for accommodating travellers. Unlike most reserved men, George Pauncefort was able to make himself at home any where, and would smoke his black-muzzled companion in a chimney-corner, amidst a little cluster of village bumpkins, with as much apparent satisfaction as in the solitude of his own chamber. Perhaps he was rather self-contained than reserved in disposition. He was entirely independent of his fellow-men—or as entirely so as any human creature can be: but he in no way resembled the conventional misanthrope; and if circumstances called upon him to do so, he

could let himself down to the level of the commonest and most ignorant of his kind without any awkward creaking of his intellectual machinery by which the letting-down process might be betrayed. He never attempted to patronise; he never made the faintest effort to assert his superiority; he wore a threadbare shooting-coat, and riding-boots that were rusty with long wear; but he never yet had found the rustic boor so slow of perception as to fail to recognise his position as a gentleman.

I have said that George Pauncefort carried upon him, so deeply branded as to be visible even to the most ignorant eyes, the stamp of some great sorrow; a sorrow of the remote past, it seemed to be; a sorrow that had been conquered and lived down, leaving the conqueror enfeebled by the anguish of the struggle, scarred by the bitter blows dealt against him in the long fight, but not utterly shattered. Time had passed, and he had buried his great trouble, and had trampled on its grave; but the ghosts of such bitter agonies will haunt us long after the woe itself is past and dead; and the

man calling himself George Pauncefort had his phantom. In dreams, in the dread wakeful hours of the quiet night, the spectre arose before him, the old pangs rent him, the cicatrised wounds opened again to pour forth new torrents of blood —that impalpable heart's-blood which we shed in such an agony.

Do you remember that story—a madman's story, as I think—of a man who murdered his enemy, and ever after, so long as he lived, on the anniversary of that hideous day, found the corpse of his victim, and had to get rid of it? Once he found the loathsome thing lying in his berth at sea, and was fain to summon up unnatural strength, and hurl it into the ocean; on another anniversary he came upon it in the desert, and buried it deep beneath the burning sands. But, let him bury it or hide it wheresoever or howsoever he would, when the dreaded day came round, the thing was there, and his work had to be done again. Does not this story seem something like an allegory? Surely there are some amongst us who have slain a sorrow and buried

it,—not once, but many times,—only to find the dreadful thing lying in wait for us in the quiet of our chambers?

But it is possible to smile and talk pleasantly enough with our fellow-men despite some lurking dread of that possible corpse lying upstairs, and *not* polite enough to confine its horrible intrusions to any given day in the year. The broken-hearted people manage somehow to hold their own in the world. All through the bright autumn weather Mr. Pauncefort found life as agreeable as life can well be to a man who has neither wife nor child, father nor mother, nor even the "bosom friend, dearer than all." Whatever pleasure can be derived from the solitary contemplation of English landscape, amidst the copses and valleys, the hills and streamlets, of one of the fairest of English shires, was his. Whatever delight a man can derive from his favourite authors and his favourite tobacco was also his. The days were rather monotonous, perhaps; very slow in their progress, very brief to look back upon, for they melted imperceptibly

one into another, like the hours that pass in a dreamless slumber, leaving no mark behind them. It was only when he saw the fern redden under the sombre shadow of the spreading oaks that he could well bring himself to believe he had been for twelve months a dweller in the Hermitage.

Yes, October had come again, and the first year of George Pauncefort's tenancy had expired; a very quiet and peaceful year, leaving no more interesting record behind it than the bill of the West-end tobacconist, who supplied Sir Jasper's tenant with mild Turkish. October had come again; and early in the month George Pauncefort found himself once more on the long terrace in front of Scarsdale Abbey.

An insignificant accident had led him thither in the bright midsummer sunshine; an insignificant accident brought him there now in the still October afternoon. One of the clumsy old chimneys at the Hermitage had given signs of imminent decay, and Mr. Pauncefort came to make some common inquiry of Sir Jasper's house-

keeper respecting the proper people to set about the necessary repairs. He had been away on one of his rustic expeditions for the last two days and nights, and had returned to find the thatched roof of the Hermitage in jeopardy, and the deaf old woman tormented by vague fears as to the chances of being buried alive at any moment under the ruins of a falling habitation.

It was only in search of a bricklayer that Sir Jasper's tenant came to the Abbey in the low yellow light of an autumn sunset; only in search of a bricklayer, and he found — what? The opening chapter of life's romance is generally very commonplace. Even on the stage, where the beautiful and the ideal are supposed to be paramount over stern reality, the grandest tragedies are apt to begin with the conventional greetings of two gentlemen meeting in a street, or the vulgar talk of a first and second citizen.

George Pauncefort was in rather a dreamy mood this afternoon. He had exhausted a good deal of physical energy during his rambles of the last eight-and-forty hours, and a pleasant languor

had succeeded the active frame of mind that is generally engendered by mountain-air and pedestrianism. It was pleasant to him in this dreamy state of feeling to linger a little on the terrace, watching the red sunlight fade behind the western woods; and he lingered. The best pleasures of his life were only such pleasures as these—a dreamy sense of rapture in the still beauty of a twilit landscape, a gentle happiness in the contemplation of a glorious sunset. He lounged with his arms folded on the broad stone balustrade, watching the fading light, and quite unaware that there was any thing but a long row of blank windows behind him, when the creaking of a hinge roused him from that most delicious state of mind popularly known as "thinking of nothing." He turned quickly, and found himself face-to-face with a lady who was standing on the threshold of an open French window. One glance at the pale face upon which the low light was shining was quite enough to reveal the lady's identity. The little aquiline nose, the broad forehead, the rippling brown hair

pushed away behind a delicate rosy-tinted ear, were very familiar to him, though he had only seen them once in a schoolgirl's careless sketch of her own profile. Marcia Denison had one of the faces that are always remembered by those who look upon them—not for their beauty, but because of their individuality. Amongst all the faces in a crowded ball-room, Sir Jasper's tenant would have been able to select the face of the girl whose sorrowful story had beguiled him in the idle hours of a summer's day.

She was a woman now, with a well-bred woman's perfect self-possession; and her look and attitude, as she stood with her hand on the fastening of the open window, were sufficient to tell Mr. Pauncefort that she had opened it on purpose to speak to him. He took off his hat as he approached her.

"Miss Denison, I believe," he said; and then, as the graceful head was slightly bowed in assent, he added, "I really have to apologise for giving myself up to the contemplation of nature from a stand-point exactly in front of your window;

but I had no idea that the family had returned. I came to make some inquiries of Sir Jasper's housekeeper."

"Papa has heard of the fallen chimney, and will be very glad to talk to you about it, if you will be good enough to come into his room. He is an invalid, and cannot venture out in this autumn weather."

Mr. Pauncefort passed through the window at which Miss Denison had been standing, and found himself in Sir Jasper's study. The bronze Neptune was looming darkly upon a gray-haired weary-looking man, who reclined in a low easy-chair, with his head lying back upon the cushions, and his worn but handsome features lighted up by the glow of a great coal-fire, upon the top of which burned a huge log of wood. The room was oppressively warm; but Sir Jasper gave a peevish little shiver as he turned his head towards the open window by which his tenant had entered the room.

"My dear Marcia, how much longer are you going to keep that window open?—I beg your

pardon, Mr. Pauncefort. Very happy to see you, and make your acquaintance; but sorry to do so under the disadvantage of an east-wind. Pray sit down. You don't care to come nearer the fire? Ah, I thought as much. You are a hardy pedestrian, I hear; a traveller, with all manner of terrific adventures to boast of. You please yourselves, you others! For my own part, I never outstep the limits of civilisation. Civilisation has been three or four thousand years coming to me; and I really don't see the justification for running away from it.—Marcia, more coals."

Miss Denison laid her hand upon the bell. She was standing at the corner of the mantelpiece, with her elbow resting on the broad slab of marble; and in the dim glimmer of the firelight the tall slim figure, so statuesque in its perfect repose, looked almost like the image of a mediæval saint keeping guard over a tomb. Sitting on the further side of the room, and at some distance from her, George Pauncefort had ample time to contemplate Marcia Denison; while the chilly Baronet discussed the condition

of his tenant's retreat, and debated the advisability of calling in an architect to survey the premises.

"The place has been lapsing into decay for the last fifty years," said Sir Jasper. "There has been piecing and patching going on, more or less, ever since I can remember. The country people rejoice in the falling of a chimney or the crumbling of a wall; and put down all dilapidations to the account of a certain gentleman, in a silken jerkin and golden lovelocks, slaughtered in a duel under that ivy-mantled roof. Do you ever see any ghosts at the Hermitage, Mr. Pauncefort?"

"A good many; but not the ghost of the fair-haired cavalier."

"Ah, you brought your phantoms with you, I suppose. Well, my dear sir, we must do our best to make the place comfortable with a little more patching and piecing; in the mean time, if there is the slightest apprehension of danger, I beg that you will take up your quarters in this house until the bricklayers have set things

right. I shouldn't mind spending a little money upon the decent restoration of the old place; its traditions are worth something; and there are dark stains on the flooring of the lower room, which stand very well for blood. I shouldn't mind spending money, if I thought you would care to retain your present abode for any length of time. A respectable tenant—a single gentleman of quiet habits—is always the highest desire of a landlord's heart. Seriously, then, Mr. Pauncefort, how long do you purpose inhabiting the Hermitage?"

"To tell the truth, Sir Jasper, the question is rather perplexing to me. I have been thinking of—"

He stopped abruptly, with his dark eyes bent on the ground. For fifteen years before this autumn evening, he had not once been a guest in a decent English home. The atmosphere of Sir Jasper's study was new to him; the quiet presence of a well-bred woman stirred him with a faint thrill of pleasure, engendered out of the very novelty of the sensation. For fifteen years

he had been a wanderer in the wildest and loneliest regions of the earth; and the glimmer of firelight in a handsome chamber, the rustle of a woman's silken gown, the fitful shimmer of diamonds on a slim white hand, were almost as strange to him as they might have been to the rudest peasant-lad weeding turnip-fields for sixpence a day upon Sir Jasper's estate.

"You were thinking of leaving us," said the Baronet, taking up George Pauncefort's unfinished sentence. "I'm not surprised to hear it. The Hermitage is an unlucky place; and I don't suppose any respectable tenant will endure a long lease of its gloom and ruin. I'm sorry to think we are likely to lose you; for I had looked forward to some social winter evenings, in which you might have indulged us now and then with a graphic sketch of African adventure. I should really have enjoyed a little vicarious peril and privation. What can be more delicious than to exist for three days and nights without food or water?—to feel the ponderous paw of a lion on your chest, and his hot breath on your face,

while a dull numbness stagnates your blood, and holds you as powerless as some heavy sleeper under the thrall of a nightmare?—to spend half-a-dozen hours, holding on for dear life, at the top of a palm-tree, with a tropical sun blazing above your uncovered head, and a hungry tiger prowling below your dangling heels?—in short, to have all the sensation of dangers whose actual risk and anguish have been endured by other people? To be frank with you, Mr. Pauncefort, I have a fancy that there ought to be some little sympathy between you and me. I have turned my back upon the world for the last few years of my life, and have lived as much apart from my race as a man can live who is too much a Sybarite to dispense with the comforts of civilisation, and too much an invalid to exist without medical science. I think there must be a little of the misanthrope in your nature, or you would scarcely have held out for a twelvemonth against the dreariness of Scarsdale Wood. However, you can hold out no longer, and you are about to leave us. I ought to have anticipated as much."

Miss Denison had seated herself in a low chair opposite her father. A little table stood near her, with a heap of new books and magazines; and she was cutting open the leaves of a periodical with a paper-knife, whose jewelled handle glimmered fitfully in the firelight. Sir Jasper's tenant found himself absently following the motions of the white hand and the glittering knife. It was so very long since he had seen an elegant woman sitting at a comfortable fireside, while the autumn wind was moaning dismally in the outer gloom beyond the curtained windows, like some banished wretch exiled for ever from the sacred shelter of home. He looked at the quiet figure, whose harmonious lines melted one into another and blended imperceptibly with the warm shadows of the background, almost as he might have looked at a picture. He looked at the quiet figure, and remembered the story of Marcia Denison's childhood. The neglected girl had grown into an elegant woman, with a certain calm beauty of her own,—a beauty of form rather than colour or expression. There are plants which

will flourish without sunshine; but they are generally pale fragile blossoms at the best. Marcia Denison had grown to womanhood without the warm light of love; and George Pauncefort was beguiled by the fancy that a stranger might have read something of her story from her face and manner. The perfect self-possession, the graceful repose, seemed to be the natural attributes of a woman from whose life all passionate emotions had been banished. No fierce throbs of jealousy had ever rent her bosom; the hopes and fears, the painful uncertainties, the agonising doubts, which wait upon the happiest of earth's affections, had never shaken her nature from its placid repose. An elegant woman, a lady in the highest sense of the word, Marcia Denison looked calmly out upon a world which had given her little joy, and could scarcely bring her any very terrible sorrow.

Mr. Pauncefort hesitated a little before he answered Sir Jasper's very friendly speech. The paper-knife travelled steadily on: the white hand appeared and disappeared as the light of the

burning log leapt up into sudden life, or died away into darkness; fitful and shadowy as those spirit-hands of which we hear so much nowadays.

"I certainly have been thinking of leaving this part of the country," George Pauncefort said at last; "but I really have neither decided upon when I should go, nor where I should go. I have been so long a traveller that English life is apt to seem a little tame and flat. As for the dreariness of my present quarters, *that* has never been disagreeable to me. I am fonder of a book and a pipe, or an early ramble on a great waste of common-land, than of all the gaieties of the universe. There are very few reasons why I *should* leave the Hermitage—perhaps scarcely one substantial reason—and there are many inducements for me to remain. Sir Jasper, will you permit me to ask you a question, and will you believe me when I assure you that it is not an impertinent one?"

"With all my heart."

"You said just now that you had turned your back upon the world. Am I to attribute

any real significance to that expression; or, in other words, am I to understand that you are not likely to fill the Abbey with visitors? I know that I have no possible right to ask such a question; but one of the chief delights of the Hermitage has been that it really *is* a hermitage. I am so much a misanthrope as to dread the invasion of jovial young sportsmen among the fern and underwood that surround my den."

"Then you may banish all fear of any such infliction," answered the Baronet decisively. "You may have heard, perhaps, that a great affliction fell upon me some years since. From that time to this I have lived a solitary life, now in one place, now in another. My daughter Marcia has been good enough to endure all my fancies, and to resign the associations and amusements which are supposed to be necessary to a young lady's happiness. She has relations who would be very glad to find a brighter and more fitting home for her; but she is so kind as to prefer remaining with me. You need fear no sporting youth amongst the fern, Mr. Paunce-

fort. I have no intention of filling my house with people I don't care about, or ruining my health in a futile attempt to sustain the popular notion of a good old English squire. I came back to Scarsdale because—because I was utterly weary of all the rest of the world, I think; and I mean to live my own life in defiance of the frowns of all the county. I don't believe in the common talk about a rich man's duty to society; and I don't feel myself called upon to turn my house out of windows in order that there may be waste and riot in the servants'-hall, and extortionate profits for the Roxborough tradesmen. I fancy that a man has a right to his own life and to bear his burden after his own fashion. It is only your hired jester who is bound to swallow his tears, and be merry at the pleasure of his audience. No, Mr. Pauncefort, there will be no high-jinks at the Abbey because Marcia and I have returned. It will be only a big empty house, with two very quiet occupants, who will always be glad to see you when the natural sociability of the gregarious animal is

strong upon you, and who will not be offended with you for stopping away at other times. And now I suppose it's a settled thing! You will stop; and I may send the bricklayers to patch up the Hermitage to-morrow."

"You are very good. Yes, I shall consider myself settled for some time to come. If you would wish me to take the place for a term of years—"

"Not at all. A willing tenant and an agreeable acquaintance I shall be delighted to retain; but an unwilling tenant may shake the dust of Scarsdale from his shoes whenever he pleases to do so. You will dine with us to-day? The second bell will ring in five minutes. Bah!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, answering a doubtful look with which George Pauncefort regarded the rusty sleeve of his shooting-coat, "never mind your dress. Do you think we cannot take any pleasure in your society because you don't happen to wear the regulation swallow-tail and cambric cravat? For my own part, I dine in my dressing-gown, and am limited to wretched slops,

prescribed by my medical man. There will be fish and a chicken, I daresay, for my daughter; and if you appreciate the lighter Rhine wines, you will have no cause to find fault with my cellar."

A great bell, clanging high in a windy cupola, pealed out upon the night; and an elderly and stately-looking butler announced dinner almost at the same moment.

"Come, Mr. Pauncefort, we are of the Diogenes family. Pray let there be no ceremony between us. Give your arm to my daughter, and forget all about your shooting-coat."

The Baronet lifted himself out of his easy-chair, and stood erect upon the hearth, — a tall weird-looking figure, in a long ruby-velvet dressing-gown, which rather resembled the robe of some alchemist or astrologer of the darker ages than the costume of one of Burke's landed gentry. Mr. Pauncefort offered his arm to Marcia Denison almost involuntarily, for he was more inclined to refuse than to accept his landlord's invitation; and the next minute he found himself following

Sir Jasper to the dining-room with Sir Jasper's daughter on his arm.

"I assure you that it is a real act of benevolence to stay with papa," she said, during the short progress from the study to the dining-room; "he is always so much better when he has pleasant society."

They dined in a snug little oaken wainscoted chamber at one end of the corridor; and before the fish was removed George Pauncefort found himself entirely at his ease in the society so unexpectedly thrust upon him. Sir Jasper expanded under the influence of a boiled sole and a glass of hock. He was a man who liked to hear himself talk, and who could talk pretty well, in rather a superficial manner, about any thing and every thing. He had your true talker's instinctive faculty of discovering a good listener; and he had found one in George Pauncefort. Not your stupid listener, who gazes at you with the fixed stare of rapt admiration, and flounders dismally in the endeavour to reply to you, thereby too clearly revealing that he has

not understood a word you have been saying; nor yet your self-absorbed listener, who abandons himself to his own reflections while you talk to him, and strikes in with a vacant grin and a "God bless my soul!" whenever you come to a full stop. Mr. Pauncefort was of the sterling metal, —the thoughtful listener, who weighs every word you say to him, and comes smashing against your pet theories with all the force of a vigorous intellect and the spirit of a born debater. Sir Jasper's face lighted up as the simple little dinner proceeded, for he fancied he had found the creature he had been long looking for: a companion— a man whose solitary habits resembled his own, and who could afford to fall into the ways of his host without going out of his own way to do it.

"We suit each other—or I venture to believe that we shall suit each other, Mr. Pauncefort," said Sir Jasper, when the stately butler and his subordinate had departed, leaving a very unpretending dessert of big round pears and ruddy-cheeked peaches. "Marcia, I verily believe that I have discovered an acquaintance who will understand

me, and whom I shall be able to understand. You may smile; but I assure you, my dear sir, the experience of a very dreary exile has taught me how rare a creature is a congenial acquaintance. I won't say a *friend*, for the word has a tainted flavour to my taste. It seems such a thoroughly understood thing that your bosom friend is a man who falls in love with the woman you want to marry, wins all your money at *écarté*, and shoots you through the lungs some chilly morning before sunrise in a swampy field on the Essex coast. Yes, a congenial acquaintance is the real *rara avis*, the impossible bird seldom found in any earthly nest. So long as I lived in the world, I was content to take my fellow-men for what they were worth. At the head of a long dinner-table it matters little to a man what his guests are worth *en détail*. He only wants them to be decent fellows *en gros;* and if they are but sufficiently noisy, if one man tells a little hunting-story against the master of a rival pack, and if another man recites the last *canard* current in Belgravia, and there are none

of those dismal pauses in which a kind of mental paralysis seems to mark every creature for its own,—he has no right to complain. But when a man washes his hands of the world and its follies, when he retires to his kennel, and yearns for an occasional visit from some kindred cynic, then comes the difficulty. He finds only dismal creatures, absorbed in the one delight of their lives —intellectual Paganinis, for ever performing on one string—artists who will talk of nothing but art—literary men who can talk of nothing but literature—political economists who are perambulating editions of Mill and M'Culloch—agriculturists who talk you to death about steam-farming and the utilisation of sewage; as if a man who has done with the world could possibly care what the world does with its sewage! There was only one Diogenes; and until to-night I have never been able to meet an acquaintance whose tastes even in seeming bore any resemblance to my own."

It was a long time since Marcia Denison had seen her father so entirely expansive in his man-

ner as he was to-night. Her dark-gray eyes brightened as she looked at him; and George Pauncefort, sitting opposite to her, and looking at her thoughtfully from time to time, saw that she was pleased with her father's pleasure. They went back to the study after dinner; and by and by Miss Denison made tea for her father and his guest. Sitting in a low luxurious chair by the great wood-fire, within a few paces of that feminine figure, the pale thoughtful face, the busy hands employed in the occupation which makes a woman seem more womanly and charming, it seemed to Sir Jasper's tenant as if the last twenty years of his life melted away, and he was a young man once more, with all a young man's freshness of spirit and happy confidence in the worth of lovely things.

Yes, all manner of fresh and gentle feelings came back upon this bruised and battered wanderer in African wildernesses. They came back, —the long-absent, the well-nigh forgotten spirits of peace and love,—and chased the dark and evil dwellers from the mansion they had so long

usurped. The man's face seemed to soften; indeed it was a face which always softened when he smiled or spoke to women and children. His voice, at all times sonorous and musical, sank to a lower and sweeter music as he sat in Sir Jasper's study, talking grave speculative talk about the sites of perished empires, whose fantastic splendours have left no better record than a ruined temple or a few quaint hieroglyphics on a broken stone.

The great clock in the Scarsdale stables struck eleven as George Paunceфort left the Abbey. He walked slowly home in the moonlight, thinking of his quiet evening with a sensation in which wonder was strangely intermingled with a vague fear.

"I had so firmly set my face to the darkness," he thought presently, "and I had learnt to endure its worst horrors,—is it wise to let in so much as an accidental ray of light?"

CHAPTER IV.

DOROTHY'S IMPRESSIONS.

EVEN your self-contained woman cannot exist entirely without some natural outlet for all that is brightest and most womanly in her nature. Marcia Denison's accomplishments stood her in good stead, and went a great way towards a placid kind of happiness, a tranquil pleasure, undisturbed by any fear that it is too lovely a thing to endure. But however accomplished a woman may be, there are times when the mind grows weary, when the tired intellect recoils reluctantly from its accustomed labour, when the empty heart yearns for some pleasant thing to nestle in its dreary void. The human mind, however skilled in the scientific combination of sweet sounds, *cannot* be altogether satisfied with harmonious sequences, quaint fugues, contrary

motions, and plaintive diminished sevenths. The human eye, however artistic, must have something more to look upon than the cool shadows and bright gleams of colour in a water-colour sketch. And a woman's soul, ever sympathetic, must have some nearer object for its warm sympathies than the dead-and-gone creatures whose stately phantoms stalk through the pages of history.

Marcia Denison, though she has some little right to rank herself among the dreaded lists of strong-minded women, was not entirely without a woman's fancies. She had her favourites amongst the people she had known from her earliest childhood, and the chief of them all was Dorothy.

Dorothy was the daughter of James Tursgood the bailiff, and by consequence the granddaughter of that elderly female who acted as Mr. Pauncefort's housekeeper. Dorothy had been a toddling baby of three when Marcia Denison was seven years old, and had been taken under the special protection of Sir Jasper's younger

daughter at a very early age. The child of seven had taken it into her wise head to patronise the rosy-cheeked toddler; and from that time until Evelyn Denison's death and the Baronet's departure for the Continent, Dorothy Tursgood had been Marcia's pet and pupil. Of course, under these circumstances, Dorothy received an education which made her infinitely charming, and entirely unfit for the rough-and-ready style of existence in her father's household. She had felt this during Marcia's long absence from Scarsdale; but it was all over now, for Dorothy was to be Miss Denison's own maid, and was to live entirely at the Abbey.

It was a pretty sight to see the two women grouped together in the autumn sunlight, in one of the deep window-seats of that chamber which had once been the schoolroom of Sir Jasper's two daughters, but which was now Marcia's own sitting-room, sacred from the footsteps of strangers.

Miss Denison sat on the cushioned window-seat, with the sunlight behind her head, while

Dorothy crouched on a low stool at her feet, and looked lovingly and reverently upward to the thoughtful face of her mistress.

That pale face, with its sharply-defined and delicate features, was pleasantly contrasted by the rosy cheeks and sunny auburn hair that *would* break away into curls, confine it with whatever fetters you could choose, the arch hazel eyes, the ripe red lips, always ready to curve themselves into bewitching smiles, the saucy double-chin, the lurking dimple at each corner of the mouth, which formed the manifold charms of the bailiff's daughter. She was a round dumpling of prettiness and sweet temper, created to be the queen of a rustic May-day, the idol of bumpkin worshippers; and the best of it was, that she was quite unconscious of her own prettiness.

And yet she was by no means a high-minded woman. She was very fond of fine dress, and would lie awake all night thinking of a new bonnet, or a coloured print that she had seen in one of the grand emporiums of Roxborough. She was vain and frivolous, and would have very much liked

to have been pretty; but she had no idea that there could be any prettiness in a dumpling figure, round red cheeks, and an impertinent little nose, which was always pointing skywards, without any pretension to sublimity. Contemplating her own reflection in a looking-glass, poor Dorothy sighed as she thought how nice it would have been to be tall and slender, like Miss Denison, with a proud pale face, and dark arched brows above deeply-clear gray eyes. Dorothy worshipped her patroness and mistress, and founded all her ideas of perfection upon this one model of womanhood. To wear corded black-silk, thick and lustreless as the rector's gown, a narrow linen collar clasped tightly round a slim swan-like throat; to have long thin white hands, all aglitter with diamond-rings, and to sit all day in beautiful rooms, seemed to Dorothy Tursgood the very perfection of human happiness, whose even course could only be disturbed by sudden death.

Dorothy, with these ideas deeply rooted in her mind, contemplated her mistress with some feeling of wonder; for Marcia Denison accepted the de-

lights of her life with a manner that was a great deal more like calm resignation than complete happiness. Could it be possible that such possessions as diamond-rings and unlimited silk-dresses might become flat and indifferent by long familiarity? Oh, if it was so, what a barren universe this world must be! and out of *what* material could the youthful mind shape its ideal of perfect bliss? Dorothy's heart had been unmoved by so much as one flutter engendered of love's restless fever, and as yet her tranquil slumbers were only disturbed by the vision of a new bonnet-ribbon, or a coral necklace purchased at Roxborough fair.

It was the third day after Miss Denison's return,—the day succeeding that quiet little dinner at which George Pauncefort had found himself an almost involuntary guest,—and Dorothy Tursgood was enjoying what she called a "lovely long talk" with her mistress. It happened somehow that Mr. Pauncefort formed the principal subject of discussion in this lovely long talk; and as the talk was almost absorbed by the viva-

cious Dorothy, this fact was by no means singular. Marcia, returned from Continental wanderings, might have a great deal to tell her enthusiastic little attendant; but Dorothy, who had spent all her life at Scarsdale, must necessarily be rather restricted in her choice of topics.

"And oh, Miss Marcia, I am sure that he is very poor," she said presently, at the end of a long disquisition upon the habits and manners of Sir Jasper's tenant.

"But why, my pet?" asked Miss Denison with a smile.

She was in a lazy humour this morning, and had thrown aside a musical composition in which consecutive fifths *would* crop up in the bass in spite of her. She had thrown aside her sheet of music-paper and shut the piano, and now she felt a drowsy pleasure in the balmy air, the mellow sunlight, and the gentle hum of pretty Dorothy's voice.

"Why do you think he is poor, my darling?"

Dorothy gave a little gasp. She had the feminine habit of jumping at conclusions, and the

equally feminine habit of not being very clear as to why she had so jumped.

"Well," she murmured thoughtfully, "first and foremost because he wears, oh, *such* a shabby coat!"

"He may wear that from choice, my Dorothy. An old garment is sometimes so comfortable to a lazy man,—and yet I should hardly think Mr. Pauncefort was lazy. Or his shabby costume may be an affectation of eccentricity,—and yet, from what I saw of him last night, I should scarcely imagine he would be guilty of affectation. However, my dear little Dorothy, there may be a dozen reasons why he should wear a worn-out shooting-coat, and not one of them need be the want of money."

"Oh, but then I think he is poor because of so many things. It isn't only the coat. There is one reason why I think he is very, very, very poor!" said Dorothy, shaking her head, and screwing up her lips with extraordinary solemnity.

"And what is that reason, dear?"

"He never gives any thing to poor people.

Never, never! And yet I am sure he is charitable; for he will go and see poor people, and sit with them, and listen to all their troubles, and ask, oh, such lots of questions, until they begin to think he's going to do ever so much for them, and then he goes away and does nothing. Now, of course, that would be very unkind if he were rich. I haven't forgotten my grammar, Miss Marcia,—subjunctive mood, if he were. So I feel sure he must be dreadfully poor. I mean dreadful, because it *is* dreadful for rich people to be poor."

"Dorothy!"

"I mean it's dreadful for people that ought to be rich to be poor. Do you know, Miss Marcia, I think sometimes the gentleman at the Hermitage is —— what's that where we always put the *th* in the wrong place?"

"Misanthropic."

"Yes, that's it—mis-an-thropic!" cried Dorothy with a triumphant snap at the last two syllables; "and oh, what a pity they can't invent some shorter word to mean grumpy, without being

vulgar! I think he *is* misanthropic, miss, because he'll shut himself up with his books for days together, grandmother says; and in all the time he's been at the Hermitage he hasn't made a single acquaintance in Roxborough; and somehow, do you know, Miss Marcia, I think he must have turned grump—misan-thingamy—from not being happy in his mind; for oh, he does give such a sigh sometimes as he sits over his books!"

"Why, Dorothy, you are a Fouché in petticoats."

"I remember all about him, Miss Marcia. Joseph Fouché, minister of police under Napoleon Bonaparte, born at La Martinière, near Nantes, 1763; created Duke of Otranto 1809; died 1820," said Dorothy, folding her hands meekly, with a lively recollection of her lessons. "Do you know, Miss Marcia, when I'm in chapel on a Sunday, I sometimes wonder whether I look different from the other girls,—whether I look as if I knew history and grammar and geography, and such like? but lor, miss, I do think a bonnet-ribbon makes more difference than all the education that ever

was," Dorothy murmured with a thoughtful sigh.

Miss Denison caressed the pretty auburn curls with her slim white fingers, and considered whether she had been very wise in cramming that simple head with a second edition of all the hard facts that had been filtered through her own brain.

"I'm afraid your education may not be much use to you in what people call a practical way, my darling," she said presently; "but education must always have a refining influence, and refinement is a kind of goodness. Besides, who knows what my Dorothy's fate may be in afterlife? There may come a day when it will be very useful to you to speak tolerably good English, and write a nice legible hand. And as for Pinnock's *Goldsmith* and Mangnall's *Questions*, this world must always have some pleasanter associations for those who know all about the dead-and-gone people who have inhabited it. In the mean while you and I can be companions now and then, Dorothy; which we could scarcely be, if you were exactly like the other girls you sit with at chapel."

"Oh, no, indeed, Miss Marcia, they are *so* dreadful, and drop their *h*'s always; and their hands are so red, and their boots are so clumpy; and they do breathe so hard, that it's quite unpleasant to sit next them. But oh, miss, I'm not good enough to be your companion ever; only you're so kind to me."

"Am I, Dorothy? I'm afraid my kindness is not without some alloy of selfishness, and may be, after all, rather ill-advised kindness."

"Selfish, dear Miss Marcia! You, who are so good to every one, and *so* kind to me; for, oh, it *is* so kind of you not to want me to wear caps!" cried Dorothy, shaking her bright auburn hair into all manner of crispy undulations and stray tendrils that were infinitely bewitching. "But what was I saying just now, Miss Marcia?" resumed the bailiff's daughter; "oh, about his being so gloomy."

"About whom, darling?" asked Miss Denison in a dreamy voice.

She had been thinking of her dead sister. It was only natural that this return to the Abbey

70689

should bring the lost girl's image very vividly before her. The place was so dull, so utterly empty and dreary without that dashing impulsive Evelyn, who had been wont to burst into Marcia's sitting-room half-a-dozen times in the course of a morning—a beautiful, spontaneous, vivacious creature, whose presence filled the dullest room with life and brightness.

"And I'm sure she loved me a little," Marcia thought very sadly; "and now there is on one—no one."

There was little Dorothy looking up at her mistress's pensive face all the time; but though Dorothy's affection was a very pleasant thing, it was not exactly the thing to fill the great void in such a heart as Marcia Denison's; it was a little too much like the grateful chirping of a bird who flutters his wings and perches lovingly on a finger of the hand that tends him; or the frisking of a petted lap-dog, nestling at the feet of his mistress. This return to Scarsdale seemed to Marcia Denison like the reopening of a wound that time had almost healed;

and her thoughts wandered far away from the subject of Dorothy Tursgood's simple prattle, which was all about that one solitary event of the last twelvemonth—the advent of George Pauncefort to the Hermitage.

"And as I said before, Miss Marcia," Dorothy rattled on, in a breathless way peculiar to the genus vulgarly known as chatterbox, "I'm sure he's very poor, dreadfully poor, and I sometimes think it's that which makes him unhappy. Because, you see, he's so clever; he *must* be very, very clever, you know; always reading, reading, reading, as he is all day, and all night too sometimes; and it does seem hard for such a clever person to be cut off from the rest of the world, and to live in the middle of a wood and see nobody, on account of his poverty."

"But you said just now that he was misanthropic, Dorothy," said Miss Denison, arousing herself by an effort from that long reverie about the dead; "misanthropic people think it no misfortune to be cut off from the rest of the world."

"Don't they, miss? I fancied people were misanthropists only when they couldn't afford to be any thing else. It must be so much cheaper to despise the human race than to wear nice clothes and give dinner-parties."

"But there is such a thing as an honest love of solitude, Dorothy, and a natural distaste for the clamour and contention of the world. Do you remember that French proverb I taught you, *Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle?* People generally say that when they have burnt out the candle and lost the game; but I suppose there are a few exceptionally wise people who keep their candle, and turn their backs upon the gaming-table. Mr. Pauncefort may be one of those people."

"I don't think that, miss," answered Dorothy, with a wise shake of her curly head; "*I* think he is a person who has had a great fortune and spent it; and, though he carries his head very high, and seems to take his troubles in an off-hand kind of way, he can't help sighing sometimes when he remembers how rich he once was.

That's what *I* think, miss, and that's what grandmother thinks. She has tried to get the truth out of Mr. Pauncefort's servant; but she says you might as well question a tombstone as him, or better, for that *would* tell you *something*, even if it wasn't true."

And here George Pauncefort's name drifted out of Dorothy's chatter, and the girl's talk rambled on into other channels; Miss Denison's hand lying tenderly on the pretty head which rested on her knee, while Miss Denison's mind wandered far away into the vanished regions of the past. Every now and then she brought herself back for a moment from that shadowy world to say something kind to her enthusiastic little maid; and even when her thoughts were furthest away, that ruder second sense—that superficial intellect which will serve us for common use, while the soul soars upward into cloudland—took cognisance of all that Dorothy was saying.

Thus it was that Marcia Denison received her first impressions about George Pauncefort.

Dorothy's estimate of that gentleman's worldly circumstances was accepted by her mistress—chiefly perhaps because the subject was too indifferent to be worth any serious discussion—and, once carelessly accepted, became a rooted conviction.

When Mr. Pauncefort paid his second visit to the Abbey, he had exchanged his velveteen shooting-jacket for a frock-coat; but the cloth was tolerably well worn, and the cut of the coat fixed the date of its confection at some years before the stranger's advent at Scarsdale. The coat might have looked *outré* and old-fashioned upon a meaner-looking man; but Sir Jasper's tenant had that indefinable something, that utterly indescribable air of distinction, which makes a man independent of his tailor. What an unspeakable distance between gentleman Brummel, created by the happy inspiration of sartorial genius, and the quiet English gentleman of the blue blood, whose haughty grace is a heritage bequeathed to him by Crusaders who fought at Acre, and Knights who saw the earth black with

the slaughtered chivalry of France on Crecy's fatal field!

Sir Jasper Denison, not easily pleased upon ordinary occasions, had been pleased to take very kindly to the solitary occupant of the Hermitage, and was inclined to go into raptures about his new acquaintance. The Baronet was very impulsive, and not a little frivolous. The bitter stroke which Fate had dealt at him had fallen on a nature too weak and selfish to be elevated or sublimated by affliction. He was a man who took the decrees of Heaven in pretty much the same spirit as that in which he might have taken the undeserved cruelty of an earthly assailant. When his daughter died, he could not bow his head and resign himself to the belief that she had only floated away from him into a fairer region, whither he might some day follow her, if he so pleased. He was a student of those brilliant philosophers whose genius illumined with flashes of lurid grandeur the eve of the French revolution. He could not make a temple of worship out of the tomb of his dead child.

The sepulchre of the beloved was a horrible thing from which he fled away to beguile his grief by a cynical contemplation of frivolous humanity amusing itself at German watering-places, or hurrying through Italian picture-galleries. It may be that Sir Jasper's sudden predilection for the society of George Pauncefort arose chiefly from the fact that the stranger was the only person at Scarsdale whose presence did not remind him of the dead. With the tenant of the Hermitage the bereaved father felt himself safe; no chance allusion to the lost, no half-retracted mention of *her* name, was likely to drop from the lips of the man who had never seen her. It is difficult for any human creature linked to an eternal future by the feeblest shred of Christian faith, to understand the unutterable horror which Death wears when he crosses the threshold of the Atheist. To Sir Jasper Denison consolation was an impossibility. The only anodyne by which his grief might at intervals be lulled to rest was occupation. He had amused himself somehow or other by those restless and fitful Continental wan-

derings, until he had used up all those regions where the Sybarite may travel without finding too many crumpled leaves among the roses, and he came back now with a vague intention of occupying himself by some desultory dabbling in building, philanthropy, and steam-farming.

In this humour the Baronet was rather pleased to hear of the fallen chimney at the Hermitage. He sent a messenger post-haste to summon the Roxborough architect on the morning after Mr. Pauncefort's visit to the Abbey; and after a very long consultation with that gentleman—to which solemn conference Sir Jasper's tenant was specially invited—certain improvements were arranged which would in no way destroy the picturesque medievalism of the Hermitage, but which were sufficiently important to render that tenement unfit for occupation during the space of some weeks.

"In which period you will do me the honour to take up your quarters here," said Sir Jasper; "I intend making myself as familiar with the Niger as I am with the Thames; and I shall

look to you, Mr. Pauncefort, to give me the delightful sensation of playing hide-and-seek with a family-party of lions every evening."

"You are very good, Sir Jasper; I was thinking of making a little pedestrian tour—"

"And depriving me of my African explorations! But a pedestrian tour in October! Wet days and foggy evenings, rheumatism and sciatica! Have you looked at your glass this morning? No, I'm sure you have not. I am an idle man, Mr. Pauncefort, and, like all idle men, learned in the signs of the times. We are going to have abominable weather for a month to come. Look at that low gray sky; and then decline the shelter of my blue bedroom in favour of the slippery moors and damp woodlands, if you dare."

Sir Jasper's tenant hesitated, looked out of the window, and then looked back into the room. It was past five in the afternoon, and the day was darkening already. The dull gray sky and shadowy landscape without contrasted dismally with the warm glow of the firelight within. There

is such a wondrous magic in the red light of a fire. Surely it must be the magic of association —dating from the far-away day when month-old babies lie upon their mother's knees and laugh for the first time to see the ruddy flames dancing up the chimney. George Pauncefort looked back into the room, and in that one moment of hesitation his resolution spread its wings and floated away into chaos. The conference had been held in the library, the chamber in which George Pauncefort had watched Marcia Denison's white hands hovering over the teacups the night before. The firelight glimmering on the morocco bindings of books that lined the wainscot from the ceiling to the floor made the room radiant with the tender glory of home, and even the grim bronze sea-god seemed to melt under that pleasant influence and modulate his monotonous voice to a gentler tone.

Some invisible spirit, permeating the very atmosphere with its subtle presence, seemed to whisper,

"This is home—home—the mystic region

which you have not inhabited for fifteen years. Welcome, poor wanderer from the desert; welcome, lost bird from a ruined nest; welcome, from your lonely tent under the cold unpitying sky, poor friendless creature; welcome—home—home!"

And then another spirit of an argumentative and rebellious order arose in the man's breast, and cried,

"What have you done that you should turn away from this pleasant shelter to tramp the country side, with houseless vagabonds for your fellow-travellers? Are you a pariah, that you must shrink away from friendly hands, and go and hide yourself among village boors and wandering outcasts?"

There was a brief pause, during which Sir Jasper amused himself by stirring the logs piled on the coal-fire, and then George Pauncefort replied:

"I will accept your invitation, Sir Jasper, as frankly as it is given. There is no reason why I should decline your hospitality, or recoil from

your kindliness." He said this with some touch of pride in his manner, and a faint glow upon his dark face.

"Good!" exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the bell. "Then I may tell Mrs. Browning to air the blue room. You will come to us to-morrow, and the builders may begin their work as soon afterwards as they please. You will bring your servant, by the by. Imagine Diogenes with a body-servant! Remember that you are exchanging one Hermitage for another. No dinner-parties; no pretty girls; no empty-headed young men to play billiards in the rainy mornings. Only a big rambling house, tolerably well filled with objects of art, and a fretful old man and his daughter. Do you think you can make yourself happy with us?"

"I am only afraid of being too happy."

"How do you mean?"

A deep flush kindled in George Pauncefort's face as the Baronet asked this question. For a moment he seemed just a little confused, and scarcely able to answer that simple inquiry;

but in the next minute he replied very quietly:

"Do you remember what Dante and Tennyson have said about 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow'? There are circumstances in the history of my life which make it impossible that I should ever have a home. Do you suppose Diogenes was free to choose any thing better when he took to his tub? I cannot imagine the cynical mood innate in man. To my mind it seems only the reactionary phase of sorrow. I have been very comfortable yonder with the ghost of the fair-haired cavalier, who has not yet been pleased to reveal himself in any palpable shape. Will it be wise to exchange my loneliness for genial companionship, and the atmosphere of a home, since there must be the going back afterwards?"

Sir Jasper shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll be tired of us before the builders have finished their work, and will be very glad to return to your solitude. Men were created to bore one another. If you are *not* tired, you will be free to come back to us whenever you please. You will

not be disturbed here by the sight of any unapproachable domestic happiness; you will be the guest of a lonely old man, who has been robbed of all that made life bright for him, and who does his best to take existence in the frivolous spirit of a *persifleur*, because he has for ever lost all chance of any deeper delight than the temporary enjoyment to be derived from the aroma of a choice wine, or the pleasant talk of an intellectual acquaintance. Do you remember what Voltaire says, Mr. Pauncefort: 'Life is a child, which must be rocked in a cradle till it falls asleep.' You and I have both had our troubles; why shouldn't we help each other to rock the cradle?"

Of course this discussion ended in George Pauncefort's acceptance of his landlord's invitation. He went back to the Hermitage pondering the matter in much the same moody spirit that he had pondered the night before, as he walked homeward under the stars.

Was it wise?

"Bah! What harm can come of it?" thought Mr. Pauncefort, impatiently; "have I grown a

dotard, that I weigh so small a business as solemnly as if it were the turning-point of my destiny? What can it matter whether I go or stay? And yet, after fifteen years' voluntary exile from civilised companionship, it seems almost like the violation of a vow. Shall I pack up my goods and go back yonder? Shall I start for Tripoli to-morrow, instead of taking up my quarters at the Abbey? No; I have come home to make my grave in England; and so long as this man preserves his solitary habits, I could have no safer shelter than Scarsdale wood."

So having let his mind slip away from a certain settled resolution which had regulated his actions for fifteen years, Mr. Pauncefort became all at once the most undecided of mankind. Throughout the evening after his interview with Sir Jasper, he seemed the prey to a perpetual restlessness of spirit, not even to be lulled into peace by man's great consoler—the pipe. He paced up and down his room, took half-a-dozen volumes from their shelves, only to stare at their

pages in abstracted mood and then to fling them impatiently aside: he put down his meerschaum, with its contents only half consumed: and it was not until after eleven o'clock that he rang for his servant, and told him to prepare for the visit to Scarsdale.

The necessary preparations could involve very little trouble, as Mr. Pauncefort's wardrobe—except in the matter of linen—was of the most limited order. Sir Jasper's tenant seemed a great deal more at ease after he had given these decisive orders to his servant. He seated himself in the ponderous old-fashioned arm-chair by the low wood-fire—the murdered cavalier may have sat in that chair, perhaps—and refilled his meerschaum. Then, as he watched the blue clouds of smoke floating upward and melting slowly away, he let his mind wander freely whithersoever it would. He thought of Sir Jasper, with all the better attributes of his nature buried in the grave of the dead: and of Sir Jasper's pensive daughter, doomed never to know a father's love, bearing her burden of sorrow with a quiet resignation

which was more beautiful than the gaiety of happier women.

"The housekeeper was quite right," thought George Pauncefort; "Sir Jasper is not unkind to his daughter: he only overlooks her."

CHAPTER V.

"AT FIRST HER IMAGE WAS A DREAMY THING."

MARCIA DENISON was pleased to find that her father had at last lighted on an acquaintance whose companionship seemed to afford him unalloyed satisfaction. During the Baronet's absence from Scarsdale his daughter had not found her position by any means a sinecure. Ambitious Madame de Maintenon found it a hard thing to amuse the unamusable. The burden of her father's *ennui* had fallen more heavily on Marcia than on the sufferer himself. When an invalid is of the discontented and fretful temperament, that invalid's nurse has a bad time of it. For five years Marcia Denison had borne the weary load of her father's sorrows, and had received only courteous little speeches and polite smiles in payment of her devotion. If he could have taken

her to his heart, what a tender and loving creature would have nestled there! But he could not do this. His daughter Evelyn had been the beautiful embodiment of his first love. For his daughter Marcia he could only feel the same cold toleration which he had felt for his second wife.

The girl knew this. She knew that her mother's heart had withered for lack of the warm sunshine of love. She knew this, and it was only the wise tolerance which generally belongs to a noble intellect that enabled her to forgive the man who had crushed her mother's gentle spirit. Happily she could forgive, for she could understand and pity.

"It was all a mistake," she thought,—"an unhappy mistake. My father gave a grand old name in exchange for a trader's fortune, and fancied that polite speeches and set smiles would make a very tolerable substitute for love."

Marcia possessed, among her few treasures, a small packet of letters, addressed by her father to her mother before their marriage. These should

have been love-letters, for they had been written during the period in which Alicia Jones had been betrothed to Sir Jasper Denison; but the cold and stately tone of the epistles was unrelieved by one gush of real feeling. They were very gentlemanly letters, such as a Sir Charles Grandison might have composed; but they were the letters of a man whose heart had never beat with one throb of affection for the woman to whom they were addressed.

In these coldly-worded letters Marcia Denison saw her father's justification. At the least, he had not deceived that dead mother, whose pale face looked out at her from an old-fashioned miniature. Marcia forgave her father, but she could not forget her mother's sorrow, and she resigned herself to the idea that she too was to descend unloved and but little lamented to the grave. The first germ of this idea had been planted in her mind long ago in her earliest childhood, when she had seen so many evidences of a love that was given to her sister, and withheld from her. But now the vague fancy had grown

into a deeply-rooted conviction, not easily to be plucked out of her breast. She fancied that no one would ever love her. She had no special ground for this belief, for she had been considerably admired whenever she had appeared in society, and she had received more than one eligible offer of marriage. But she was an heiress, —the actual possessor of a very large fortune, inherited from her plebeian mother, and having the prospect of a second fortune from her father. She therefore took it for granted that her wooers were actuated by purely mercenary considerations, and dismissed them with freezing coldness. They only insulted her by a pretence of love which they could not feel, and she was wounded and made angry by their affected preference.

Remember that her claim to be considered a strong-minded woman was based only on her studious habits, her superior education. In actual experience of the world she was no better skilled than a schoolgirl. Before her sister's death she had been too young to appear very often in society; and since that melancholy event she had

seen only the few people whom from time to time her father had "taken up," generally to let them drop again with ill-concealed disgust and disappointment.

And now he had been pleased to take up the tenant at the Hermitage; and but for a dread of some sudden and scarcely polite revulsion of feeling, poor Marcia would have been entirely pleased that her father should have a new acquaintance, likely to beguile him in those long dreary winter evenings rapidly approaching. Miss Denison felt more hopeful of this new friendship than of many which her father had chosen to make during his Continental travels, for she saw that Mr. Pauncefort was a gentleman, and many of her father's acquaintance had not been quite gentlemen,—only that excellent electro-plated imitation of the real article which looks so brilliant, until the edges begin to be worn away by familiar use. No one could possibly have mistaken Mr. Pauncefort for any thing but a gentleman. No certificate of character was needed before you admitted him into your house; poor and out-at-elbows perhaps; ruined

by extravagant habits, it might be; for these things may happen to a gentleman of the blood-royal; but branded by no dishonour, degraded by no low vices, debased by no meanness of thought or deed.

Marcia accepted her father's guest as frankly as if she had known him from her childhood. His grave demeanour, his probable poverty, recommended him to her. Her pensive spirit would have shrunk from a brilliant favourite of fortune, but it advanced to greet this toil-worn wayfarer with kindness and pity.

Ah, then indeed George Pauncefort felt what it was to breathe the atmosphere of home after long years of banishment; home, created by the presence of a good and pure-minded woman. Shall I describe how a quiet sympathy, a tacit friendship, first arose between this man and Marcia Denison? It is so difficult to describe the beginning of friendship. No doubt it dated from the first happy coincidence of thought or fancy, in which two minds unite in sudden harmony, like notes struck at random on an instrument that yet compose a perfect chord.

Amongst all the chance acquaintance whom it had pleased Sir Jasper to patronise, this bronzed African traveller was the only creature in whose society Marcia had been able to take any pleasure. And then she pitied him because he was poor, and friendless, and lonely; she trusted him implicitly, inspired by an instinctive confidence in the nobility of his nature. He was very much her senior, highly educated, refined, poetical; and all the chivalrous sentiments of this daughter of Joneses and traders were aroused by the contemplation of his loneliness and ruin. She had quite accepted Dorothy Tursgood's theory about this solitary stranger. He had been rich, and had squandered or lost a great fortune. His friends,—bah! they were gone with the friends of Timon; vanished, like all followers of the general who is beaten in the great battle of life. He was very poor, and had come to Scarsdale Wood to hide himself and his fallen fortunes from the world which had smiled on his prosperity. It was a very plausible theory; and any chance word that George Pauncefort did let drop upon his own affairs tended to its

confirmation. If he talked of pictures, he talked like a man who had possessed such things, and had lost them. He brought Marcia some books one day from the Hermitage, and the volumes looked somehow like *jetsam* and *flotsam* from the wreck of a splendid library. The coat he wore was almost threadbare; but even Marcia's inexperienced eye could recognise the genius of a crack West-end tailor in the harmonious outlines of the shabby garment. The old-fashioned watch which he carried at the end of a plain black ribbon was an exquisite toy of gold and enamel, which had belonged to Louis the Sixteenth, and looked like the last cherished remnant of a collector's treasures.

He was standing in the mullioned window at the end of the corridor one morning with Marcia Denison, looking into the old-fashioned garden which she called her own. He was standing where he had stood to hear the history of Sir Jasper's two daughters from the lips of the garrulous old housekeeper.

For some minutes he had been standing in the

same attitude, looking at the old garden with a fixed dreamy gaze. He had been a guest at the Abbey for nearly three weeks, and a pleasant friendliness had arisen already between him and Marcia. She was sitting at the little table, moving the ivory chessmen stealthily to and fro upon the board, and looking up with a half-smile at his dreamy face.

"You know some other garden like this, Mr. Pauncefort?" she said, presently.

He started, and looked at her fixedly; with something like alarm in his glance.

"How did you know that, Miss Denison?"

"I could see it in your face. Do you think I could live so long almost alone with papa, and not learn to read people's faces? I can read his thoughts — I sometimes wish I couldn't — even when they lie deepest; and yours were very easy to read just now. You would never have looked so tenderly at my garden if there had not been the memory of some other garden in your mind."

"Yes, you are right. I fancied myself thirty years younger than I am; and I was a little boy

feeding ducks in a pond something like that one yonder under the shadow of the old wall. I almost felt my mother's hand in mine—I almost heard the rustling of her dress as the autumn wind swept by us just now, and stirred those fallen leaves. Yes, I was thinking of another garden far away in the heart of Yorkshire. I daresay the weeds are growing thickly enough there now."

He sighed like a man who remembers and regrets a lost heritage: then turning away from the window suddenly, he said,

"Miss Denison, I never told a lie in my life, and yet I have not the courage to show myself in the place where I was born."

"Ah," thought Marcia, "Dorothy was right. He must be very poor, for poverty is the only sin which a man can bear nobly, knowing all the while that he can never be forgiven by the world."

And then the gray eyes, marvellously soft when pity glanced from their clear depths, were gently raised to the traveller's bronzed face. Poor ruined wanderer! Miss Denison began to think

of some plan for his future comfort. Her father had influence: might not that influence be exerted in favour of this friendless stranger? Some small appointment; some foreign mission; some civilian's position in India,—so many men with blighted fortunes had been known to flourish anew under the shadow of the Himalayas. The woman whose pity is unmixed with any practical spirit is no true woman. To pity a person was, with Marcia, to help them.

Mr. Pauncefort seated himself before the chess-table. He was by no means apt to make a parade of any gloomy secrets that might lie hidden in his breast; but when a man carries a fox under his waistcoat a stray paw of the animal *will* now and then peep out from its hiding-place.

"Shall we play, Miss Denison?" asked Sir Jasper's tenant, laying his hand upon the ivory pieces.

"If you please."

They were both good players: but to-day Marcia's tactics were of the most erratic order. Her knights dropped unresistingly into the hungry jaws of her opponent's bishops: her poor

little pawns were swept off the board by swooping castles: and even her queen fell a victim to the stealthy sidelong advances of a knight.

"Check-mate; and a doubtful victory, Miss Denison," cried George Pauncefort. "Your thoughts have been far away from the pieces under your hand. I am afraid the game has bored you."

Miss Denison blushed. Her father's guest was offended: and yet she had been weaving little schemes for his advancement all the time. That Indian appointment: if it could only be procured, this man might achieve a new opening in life, new prospects, new hopes, almost a renewal of youth. And while Marcia was scheming for his benefit, the ungrateful creature was angry with her for being inattentive to a game at chess. Some women would have been indignant at Mr. Pauncefort's offended tone; but not Marcia Denison. She was quite a woman, in the highest and purest sense of the word; no frivolous girl, greedy of admiration, eager for conquest; but a woman, long-suffering, tender, unselfish, with the simple

candour of a child, the patient heroism of a martyr.

Mr. Pauncefort had been nearly three weeks an inmate of Scarsdale Abbey, and in that time he and Marcia had been very much together; in spite of those feminine employments which kept the young lady in her own apartment for several hours during the day. That quiet house was the very place of all others for the growth of friendliness and intimacy between two people who were inclined to like each other. And these two people were peculiarly disposed to be friendly, for the gentle spirit of compassion had taken up her abode in the breast of each. George Pauncefort cherished the memory of that simple family history related to him by the old housekeeper—that story of a sorrowful childhood, a poor little motherless girl forgotten and neglected. He remembered this, and it was by the light of this knowledge that he regarded Marcia Denison when first he became acquainted with her. He did not recognise the heiress of Scarsdale in that stately young lady with the pale still face: he only saw

the luckless little girl who had never been so happy as to win a father's love,—the neglected daughter whose lonely childhood had developed into a lonelier womanhood.

From a happy frivolous-minded girl, radiant with the consciousness of her own fascinations, eager to assert and establish the royalty of her beauty, Sir Jasper's tenant would have shrunk away terror-stricken; but in pale Marcia's quiet presence he felt a sense of peace and security that wrapped him round like the balmy breath of southern breezes on a sunless autumn day. They pitied each other, and involuntarily their voices took a softer music when they talked together. She was so sorry for his poverty and friendlessness: he was so sorry for her loveless childhood, and joyless, wasted youth.

And in the mean while capricious Sir Jasper seemed to have become suddenly constant. Mr. Pauncefort had been three weeks at the Abbey, and as yet there were no chilling tokens of disenchantment. Every morning at nine there was the same cosy little breakfast in the oak-paneled

dining-room; every evening at seven the same comfortable little dinner and delicate Rhenish wines. And then between breakfast and dinner there were chance meetings in the corridor or on the terrace; and then after dinner there was the long quiet evening—the delicious home-like evening, with endless talk and strong tea, brewed in a *chef-d'œuvre* in the way of tea-pots, and poured into Dresden tea-cups by a woman's graceful hands.

Is it wise, George Pauncefort,—is it wise to linger and be happy, when there must be, sooner or later, the going back? He had excuses for lingering. Surely never, in a commercial and business-like point of view, were workmen so slow as those masons and carpenters and bricklayers who were intrusted with the restoration of the Hermitage. And on the other hand, looking at the edifice with the eyes of Sir Jasper's visitor, surely no fairy palace ever hurried more swiftly towards completion than the quaint old building in the wood.

"Already!" That mystic word which the

pensive voyager who journeys with Sir Edward Lytton's Boatman has need to repeat so often, sounded like a death-knell in the ears of George Pauncefort. He had stayed five weeks at the Abbey, and the workmen had been busy a week beyond the time appointed for their task; and now he had nothing to do but to render polite thanks for the Baronet's hospitality, and then go back to his old quarters.

His old quarters! Would they ever seem as they had seemed to him? would there ever be the dull quiet, the same gray, joyless calm, which was at least peace? The perfect comfort to be had out of a book and a pipe; the contentment which arises in the mind that has fully resigned itself to abjure all hope of happiness,—should he ever know these again? Ah, fool! he could scarcely close his eyes now without seeing a woman's figure, a delicate face bending over a tea-table, the drooping curve of a slender throat, the fitful shimmer of a silken dress in a firelit chamber. And it was late in November now, and the nights would be so long. Ah, weary wayfarer, if

the angels who guard the gates of Paradise should lower their flaming swords, and ask you to step in and rest, beware of their kindness, reject their offered bounty; for after the joy of the garden comes the anguish of *going back;* and the dusty highway will seem a thousandfold more barren by contrast with that glimpse of the lost Eden.

Some such thoughts as these may have been in George Pauncefort's mind upon the last evening of his stay at the Abbey, for he was very silent. He had been wont to talk a great deal, and to talk well during these peaceful evenings, so untrammeled by ceremonious restraints, so secure from the intrusion of any incongruous element from the outer world. Travellers snowbound within the hospitable walls of an Alpine monastery could scarcely have been more entirely alone than these three people were in the big library at Scarsdale. Even Sir Jasper, who prided himself on a serene indifference to the coming and going of those acquaintance whom he took it into his head to admire and patronise—even Sir Jasper's sallow face wore an expression of

genuine regret as he spoke of his guest's departure.

"To-morrow morning! and you say you must go? You want to fall back into your old habits —study, and so on. Well, Mr. Pauncefort, I have no right to put in any selfish pleas against what seems a very settled determination. If you must go, you must; and I must resign myself to turn my back upon Africa, and forego my after-dinner hand at *écarté*. Marcia has been good enough to learn the game; but no woman ever played *écarté;* their only notion of the game is, that the king must be somewhere in the pack, and that if they only go on proposing long enough, they're sure to get him. I shall miss you very much, Mr. Pauncefort; we disagreed so delightfully about Bolingbroke and Voltaire. There is nothing so agreeable as the society of a man whose opinions are totally opposed to one's own. I shall miss you most—confoundedly!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, almost testily. "I wish I were some despotic Oriental potentate, with the power of submitting to you the option of remaining my guest,

or going out into the courtyard to be bowstrung; but our western civilisation is against that sort of thing, and I can only ask you to come and dine with us as often as you can."

"I shall be very glad to come back again. You cannot suppose that I am churl enough to undervalue the delight of congenial society; but I have already told you, Sir Jasper, there are circumstances in my life which preclude my ever having a home of my own; and I am afraid of growing too dependent on pleasant companionship. I have spent twelve months very comfortably with no comrades but my pipe and my book, and I want to go back to my Hermitage before sybarite habits have been engendered by your hospitality."

Sir Jasper's tenant had laid some little stress upon the words, "there are circumstances in my life which preclude my ever having a home of my own;" and he had stolen one little look at Marcia as he spoke them.

Miss Denison's face was turned towards him with an undisguised expression of infinite com-

passion. He thought the clear gray eyes, so wondrously serene, so calm in their tender thoughtfulness, might have shone out of the face of a pitying angel pensively contemplative of earthly sorrow.

And then Sir Jasper's tenant seemed to put aside whatever sad thoughts had kept him silent that evening, and talked as it was his habit to talk, with a quiet earnestness that sometimes almost warmed into enthusiasm. He was nearly forty years of age, and was therefore unafflicted with that terrible incapacity for any emotion which seems common to the youth of this generation. To him life seemed a battle-field in which it was a noble thing to be victor: and if he had retired to hide himself in his tent, it was that he had fought the fight and had been beaten, and not because he considered the battle a pitiful fray, scarcely worth the winning. To-night he talked more eloquently than was his wont; and Sir Jasper, who was nothing if not a *persifleur*, was fain to let the conversation lapse almost into a duologue between his daughter and his guest, for it soared into regions

which he could only enter when carried aloft by stronger pinions than his own. Ah, how short the hours seemed to George Pauncefort that night; and what a grim tyrant that bronze sea-king, scowling grimly above the dial on which the minute-hand revolved so swiftly! It was after midnight, when a politely smothered yawn from Sir Jasper gave the first hint at any thing like weariness in that narrow circle, and recalled Mr. Pauncefort from those far-away realms of thought in which it had been so pleasant to roam with gentle, womanly Marcia Denison. Perhaps that was her highest charm. She was a woman!—not a deliciously gushing creature, whose lovely eyes would fix themselves upon you in tender compassion for your sad cough one minute, and who in the next would bounce out of the room and expose you to the horrors of an east wind by leaving a door open. She was a woman—a ministering angel in the hour of affliction, and not "uncertain" or "hard to please" at any time; nor yet conscious of any divine right to be pleased at the cost of other people's pleasure. George Pauncefort gave one

regretful look round the room, as he said good-night.

"I think I will say good-night and good-bye too," he said. "I have planned one of my pedestrian excursions for the next few days, and shall take my departure at daybreak to-morrow."

"But we shall see you soon again?"

"I hope so. I—if you are good enough to wish it, I shall be very glad to come back—now and then."

"Good enough to wish it!" cried Sir Jasper testily. "When I have found the *rara avis* I have been hunting for the last five years—a congenial companion! We suit each other, Mr. Pauncefort, all the better, maybe, because there is a great deal in me that you don't approve, and a great deal in you that I can't understand. We are as far as the poles asunder, perhaps, in character; but we are just the sort of people who can get on admirably together. What can you do with a man whose ideas are the same as your own? Black is white, say you; of course it is,

answers he; and you're at a deadlock for the rest of the evening. Give me the man who says, 'No, it isn't.' I can get on delightfully with him. By the by, you will spend Christmas with us, I trust, Mr. Pauncefort? No county families, no would-be medievalism,—boars' heads with lemons in their mouths, rejoicing retainers, fiddlers in the music-gallery, and so on; none of your Christmas-in-the-olden-time absurdities; master and mistress leading off Sir Roger de Coverley, with a ruck of servants and farm-labourers streaming behind, and the odour of the stables permeating the atmosphere; no roasted oxen, scorched outside and raw inside; no bales of blanketing, distributed amongst grateful peasantry, who will turn up their noses at the quality of your beef, and slander you because of the coarseness of your flannel. I suppose we do something benevolent in deference to the prejudices of our age. My daughter Marcia has *carte blanche*, and women seem to find that sort of thing rather amusing. For the rest, we shall be quite alone. I suppose the cook will insist upon sending up that conventional cannon-ball, in the

way of confectionary, which she calls a plum-pudding; but I promise you there shall be no further indication of what grocers and illustrated-newspaper proprietors entitle the 'festive season.'"

Mr. Pauncefort smiled: his smile was very beautiful,—all the more beautiful, perhaps, because it savoured rather of thought and sadness than of mirth.

"I have no wish to forget the festive season," he said, "though it has found me very lonely for the last fifteen years. But I am weak enough to entertain a lingering affection for the traditionary Christmas; and I shall be very sorry when its last vestiges have melted into the darkness of a forgotten and unregretted past. I like to hear 'the clear church-bells ring-in the Christmas morn,' and to remember A Wanderer who was more homeless than I am, and who was the first great Teacher of the dignity of sorrow."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, shrugging his shoulders; "*pas connu, mon ami.* You remember what Voltaire says; or you don't, perhaps, and you'll be angry with me if I quote him. Let us

part good friends, and meet to quarrel again at Christmas."

Mr. Pauncefort hesitated.

"You are very kind, but I—"

"You are heartily tired of our society, and don't want a second infliction of it."

"My dear Sir Jasper, I—"

"Oh, of course you will deny the fact. Diogenes is an impossibility in an age in which every man sends his boys to Eton. If you are not heartily sick of us, and have no better engagement, come to us at Christmas. You promise?"

"Yes, Sir Jasper; if my coming can please you."

He spoke to the Baronet, but he looked at the Baronet's daughter. The pale still face betrayed neither interest nor emotion this time. It was the face of a woman who listened, from mere politeness, to a discussion whose result was entirely indifferent to her.

"Good-night and good-bye, Sir Jasper. Good-night, Miss Denison."

He gave his hand to each, and was gone. He

stopped for a moment outside the door,—the ponderous uncompromising door which closed upon him with such a sonorous reverberation.

"I wonder if Adam felt as I do, when the angel shut the gates of Paradise?" he thought; "but then Adam was banished for his *own* sin, and I—"

Half an hour afterwards, in his own room,—the pretty blue-draperied chamber, where every thing smelt of a delicately perfumed pot-pourri which seemed peculiar to the Abbey; the home-like room, with a snug little writing-table and a capacious easy-chair wheeled close to a noble fire burning in a quaint old-fashioned grate,—alone in this room, George Pauncefort flung himself on his knees by the bed, and with his face hidden in his clasped hands, prayed long and fervently.

Sir Jasper Denison would have laughed aloud in amused amazement at the sight of that big broad-shouldered man kneeling in the reverent attitude of a little child. Sir Jasper would have been even more surprised if any one had told him the burden of the man's prayer:

"Oh, keep me from loving her! Paralyse all tenderness of feeling in this withered heart! Give me strength to accept my destiny, and to be patient unto the end!"

CHAPTER VI.

"ALL WITHIN IS DARK AS NIGHT."

MR. PAUNCEFORT adhered to the resolution he had declared at night, and left Scarsdale Abbey when there was only the faintest glimmer of light in a chill gray sky.

He let himself quietly out of the little side-door by which he had first entered the Abbey, and went away under the fading stars, while the great clock in the stables was striking six. About a hundred yards from the house he stopped short, and looked back at the long range of windows, the closed shutters, the lowered blinds,—all blank, all dark. No eye to watch his departure; no pale regretful face shining out upon him, like one of those fading stars up yonder! Nothing!

He looked from the dark house up to the wide heaven. Ah, *there* the light was dawning, pale as

yet, but brightening just a little with every passing moment.

"Shall I accept it as an omen?" he thought; "here only darkness, but the light there. Is my fate so hard that I should revolt against the hand that laid my burden upon me? There have been men who, of their own free will, for love of God and of their fellow-men, have cheerfully resigned as much as I have lost. 'Let me remember *that*, when the rebellious spirit rises in my breast and asks, 'Why should I suffer?'"

For three days and nights Mr. Pauncefort vanished from the neighbourhood of Scarsdale. He was away tramping on solitary country roads, under a dull November sky; tramping steadily, with his face to the chilly autumn wind, with his face to the rain, the sleet, the darkness; now talking to some tired outcast, lagging wearily on his beat; now exchanging a few cheery words with a passing rustic; sometimes quite alone for hours together; but always tramping steadily on, like a man who has backed himself heavily to walk a hundred miles in a hundred consecutive half-hours.

It was very late upon the fourth day after his departure from the Abbey, when Sir Jasper's tenant returned to the Hermitage. He walked back to his simple domain travel-stained and tired. All was prepared for him: pine-logs burning redly on a cheerful fire; a reading-lamp on a little table, trimmed and ready; an old worm-eaten arm-chair wheeled close to the wide hearth. The moonlight streamed in at the low lattice-window, and fell in a slanting line across that polished oaken floor, which might or might not be stained with the life-blood of the traditionary cavalier. The room looked very comfortable, half in the solemn light of the moon, half in the ruddy glow of the fire. It was as good a welcome as a lonely wanderer had any right to expect; and yet, ah me! how sad and cold it seemed to Sir Jasper's tenant! The titled backs of his favourite books, winking and blinking in the fire-light, seemed to smile at him: as who should say, "In us behold the harmless friends who know not weariness, the silent comforters in whose companionship there lurks no hidden danger."

Mr. Pauncefort's quiet servant came into the room, at the sound of the opening and shutting of the door. He found his master standing by the hearth, his elbow resting on an angle of the chimney-piece, his eyes bent moodily on the fire.

"You are tired, sir," the man said respectfully, as he lighted the lamp. It was a reading-lamp, with a deep green shade, and it only lighted the room with a subdued glimmer; but even in that doubtful light Andrew Milward, the valet, saw that his master's face was paler than usual, and that there was a worn look about the eyes and mouth that had not been there since the first month or so after the traveller's return to England.

"Yes, I am very tired; I have walked greater distances and longer hours this time."

"Shall I get you any thing, sir?"

"Yes, you may get me a cup of tea, the never-failing consolation of old women and—old bachelors. You have no occasion to look so anxiously at me, my dear Milward; you must expect a man to seem a little knocked up after

doing ninety miles of a hilly country in four days of very uncertain weather. Get me that tea as quickly as you can. How do you find this place after the builders' work? They have not done away with its medievalism, I am very glad to see. There are no radical changes?"

"Not at all, sir. New flooring, new bannisters on the staircase, new woodwork about the windows, a new stack of chimneys, and a few beams here and there, where the house seemed shaky; but every thing quite in the old style, sir."

Mr. George Pauncefort retired to his room on the upper story and made his toilet, which involved a great deal of cold water, a change of linen, and the substitution of a loose morning-coat for the velveteen shooting-jacket, which he was wont to wear in his pedestrian rambles. It was only nine o'clock, and Sir Jasper's tenant had a long lonely evening before him—the first lonely evening after many pleasant hours of bright and genial companionship. He went back to his sitting-room. The queer old teapot was in its wonted

place among the ashes; a faded red cloth curtain was drawn across the moonlit window, and the oaken panelling only reflected the cheery glow of the fire. Mr. Pauncefort filled and lighted his pipe, took a book at random from the shelf nearest to him, and began to read.

How many lines did he read? About twenty perhaps; then the hand holding the book slowly dropped by his side, the proud head sank forward on the broad breast, the dark eyes fixed themselves dreamily on the burning logs.

"And I have known such peace in this place!" mused Sir Jasper's tenant. "What have I lost, what have I lost, since I last sat alone beside this hearth?"

He could find no answer to that question. He had chosen to break a resolution that had been almost a vow, and he was paying the penalty of his folly.

"Oh, fool, fool, fool!" he muttered presently; "fool not to have better estimated the peril of such association—the horror of such a contrast!"

He went back to his book with a weary sigh.

It was a delicate little masterpiece of the typographical art, a tiny volume of classic literature, published by Firmin Didot,—an expensive fancy for so poor a man as Sir Jasper's tenant—a volume to set a book-hunter's mouth watering with epicurean longing; but Mr. Pauncefort's hand dropped by his side a second time—his moody glances went back to the fire, not to be beguiled by delicate line-engravings, or pearly type, or quaint initial letters in scarlet printing-ink.

He restored the book to its place on the shelf presently, and began to walk slowly up and down the room with his arms folded and his head bent. The dark brows contracted over those thoughtful eyes, full of gloomy thoughts to-night, as it seemed. The hard lines about the mouth grew harder as the lonely tenant paced backwards and forwards in the dimly-lighted chamber.

"I have seen the room in which Martin Luther threw his ink-bottle at Satan," muttered Mr. Pauncefort by and by; "but nobody tells us whether the diabolical intruder took the hint

and departed. There are devils that are not to be driven away by ink-bottles, or walked down by ninety-miles' ramble in a hilly country."

He paced the room for nearly an hour with the same slow steady step, his head still bent, his brows still fixed in the same dark frown. Then with a suddenly impatient gesture he moved the lamp to a side-table, on which there stood an old-fashioned mahogany desk, brass-bound at the corners, and provided with a formidable lock. He unlocked this desk, took a quire of paper from the lowest partition, dipped his pen into the ink, and began to write:

"*The Hermitage, Scarsdale, near Rowborough,*
November 30th, 1855.

DEAR WILLIAMS,—Will you take immediate steps to ascertain the exact whereabouts of '*that person*,' present mode of life, surroundings, and so on. I have a reason for—"

And here Sir Jasper's tenant came abruptly to a standstill, and began to bite the feathered end of his pen with that abstracted manner

peculiar to a writer who finds some difficulty in the composition of his epistle. Mr. Paunce-fort's difficulty appeared of an unsurmountable nature, or was at any rate beyond his patience, for he tore the half-written page in fragments and flung them into the fire. Then leaning over his desk with the same moody expression of countenance that had distinguished him through-out that evening, he opened first one partition, then the other, with the idle abstracted manner of a man who has no motive for what he is doing.

There were the usual contents of an old-fashioned writing-desk lurking in those two dry wells of epistolary rubbish. There were the usual packets of faded letters, which it is so difficult to look at without a vague sense of pain—it is so much more than likely that some of the writers are dead; so terribly probable that most of them are changed, and would blush to see the pale protestations and promises of the past, remembering how bitterly they have been belied. And hidden under those packets of letters there was something from which the wandering hand

of Sir Jasper's tenant recoiled with a terrified start, as it might have done if, groping idly among withered leaves, it had lighted unawares upon a snake. The hand recoiled, and the dark face grew livid: but after just one moment's indecision, the hand brought the reptile to light.

It was a very innocent-looking serpent. Only a crimson morocco case, flat and square, and a little old-fashioned. Evidently a miniature case belonging to a period prior to the days in which scientific photographers arose to annihilate the simple artists who painted pretty simpering faces, very pink in the lights, and very blue in the shadows, smirking out of a background of burnt-sienna dots.

Mr. Pauncefort opened the case, and looked at the miniature. The snake was a very beautiful reptile. Keats's Lamia could scarcely have been lovelier of aspect than were the two faces which smiled the same smile on that piece of painted ivory.

Yes, two faces, and yet only one face. The duplicate resemblances of twin sisters smiled on

the moody tenant of the Hermitage. The miniature was very exquisitely painted; and never had two more beautiful faces beamed upon cold and lifeless ivory.

The sisters were in the earliest bloom of youth, the freshest splendour of beauty. Eyes darkly lustrous, dangerously lovely, as those with which Judith may have watched the slumbers of Holofernes—from which Cleopatra might have looked destruction on Marc Antony; noses of an aquiline type, whose bold character gave a queen-like grandeur to those youthful faces; lips whose crimson fulness reminded you of beautiful velvety fruits ripened under a southern sun, but in whose expression there lurked something which the physiognomist would have shrunk from, distrustful and abhorrent; dark waving hair falling loose on snowy shoulders; rounded arms intertwined in sisterly embraces.

Sisters are always sisterly—in a picture. These were the things that George Pauncefort contemplated with that fixed frown upon his face, that ominous light in his eyes.

Suddenly he set his teeth together fiercely, and with his eyes still fixed upon the two faces, cried aloud:

"Twin vipers, hatched in your foul nests for the destruction of honest men: created to sting and torture the breasts that shelter you. Wherever you may be—you, the living—you, the dead—may God have that mercy upon your sins which I *cannot* feel! No, I have wrestled with the devil: but he is too strong for me, and I *cannot* forgive. O Thou who didst plead upon the Cross for Thy enemies, Thou *couldst not* divorce. Thyself from Thy godhead. I am only man, and I can love, admire, worship; but I cannot imitate Thee."

He rose, took the miniature out of the case, and dropped it upon the bare stone hearth. The faces on the painted ivory smiled up at him as he looked at them just for one moment before he set his heel upon the picture and ground it into atoms.

CHAPTER VII.

DOROTHY'S CONQUEST.

DOROTHY TURSGOOD was a Roman Catholic. If she had been a fire-worshipper or a Mohammedan, a Thug or an adorer of Ashtoreth, and an implicit believer in the necessity of human sacrifices, she could have scarcely been regarded, in a spiritual point of view, with greater horror than she now was by the Protestant members of Sir Jasper's household. Temporarily regarded, Dorothy was a very nice girl, with simple winning manners, and a face that was almost as bright as a sunbeam; but in a theological sense she was an obstinate heretic, resolutely bent upon marching straight to destruction; getting up early in the morning to attend idolatrous ceremonials, and treasuring pagan idols in the shape of little gilt-edged and lace-paper-bordered engravings of

unknown saints and martyrs. I don't suppose poor little Dorothy could have explained very distinctly the differences between her own faith and that of her fellow-servants. The Tursgoods were of Hibernian extraction, and Dorothy believed in the Pope, as her parents and ancestry had believed before her, as some splendid abstraction who, in supreme humility, condescended now and then to receive tribute in the way of halfpence even from so small a personage as Dorothy herself. Dorothy had the organ of veneration very fully developed under the ruddy brown hair that would not come straight, and was ready to believe pretty implicitly in every thing that seemed good and beautiful and very high above her. If any thing could have shaken the faith that had been taught her in her childhood, it would have been the influence of her young mistress; but Marcia Denison had no desire to make a proselyte of her simple-minded little maid.

"I had rather you should be a good Catholic than a bad Protestant, my darling," she said;

"and I think you and I can read St. Thomas à Kempis together without entering into any abstract arguments about our different creeds. If we can only be Christians, Dorothy, I fancy we may hope to be forgiven any error in our choice between Paul and Apollos."

Dorothy had to go a very long way to perform her Sabbath devotions. The nearest Catholic chapel was an unpretending edifice, in a back district of the naval and military dépôt beyond Roxborough; and to this chapel Mr. Tursgood and his family had been wont to repair in a tax-cart every Sunday morning, ever since Dorothy could remember. Miss Denison was no exacting mistress, and Dorothy was still free to accompany her family to chapel on a Sunday morning, while Marcia walked alone to a little village church close to the gates of Scarsdale Park.

It is the morning after George Pauncefort's return to the Hermitage—a bright morning for November—and Dorothy has run across the park to the home-farm, in time to take her accustomed

place in the bailiff's tax-cart. She is welcomed clamorously by younger sisters and brothers, who look upon her as a prodigy of learning and elegance; but she only receives a nod from her father, who is by no means a demonstrative man, and who condemns the teaching his daughter has received from Miss Denison as "a pack of Frenchified nonsense, like to turn the wench's head and make her too fine for service."

To-day Dorothy was not to return to Scarsdale in her father's cart. Her mistress had given her a holiday, in order that she might spend the day with a cousin, who was rather a stylish person, having served her time at a milliner's in Roxborough, and having lately united her fortunes to those of a dashing young clerk in the service of a brewer. With these distinguished relations Dorothy was to dine, and they had undertaken to see her safely home before dusk, or, at any rate, as far as the gates of Scarsdale Park.

To Dorothy's mind this going out to dinner was a very great event; more especially as she had a new bonnet—a real black-velvet bonnet,

silk velvet, with sky-blue bows inside—wherewith to dazzle the experienced eyes of Selina Dobb. The clerk's name was Dobb; but he was a very stylish person in spite of that plebeian and monosyllabic appellation. A man cannot help his name; and Mr. Henry Adolphus Dobb's appearance on Sundays would have been dashing even if displayed by a scion of the house of Montmorency.

I am afraid Dorothy's mind was prone to wander that day in chapel, and that the new bonnet had a sadly distracting effect upon the pretty little head inside it. She tried very hard to keep her eyes fixed upon her book as she knelt meekly by her father's side; but the frivolous fancies would go vagabondising away from the Aves and Paters which the rosy lips mechanically whispered.

Castleford is a military dépôt; and the congregation at that little Roman-Catholic chapel was generally pretty liberally sprinkled with the martial element. On this particular Sunday there were a good many red-coats dotted about the

place, and there were two near the altar to which Dorothy's eyes wandered now and then in spite of herself. These two special red-coats were worn by a couple of officers, one of whom seemed completely absorbed by the service in which he was assisting; while the other, on the contrary, sat in a lounging attitude and stared about him, except when, in some especially solemn portion of the ceremonial, he dropped on his knees and mechanically assumed a reverential air.

It happened somehow that this inattentive officer's glances, wandering here, there, and every where, seemed to wander oftenest of all towards Dorothy's new bonnet. It was not the first time that Dorothy had seen this officer in chapel; and last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, when she had only worn a very old shabby bonnet, she had observed the same phenomenon. The officer's eyes, roving here and there, fixed themselves very often upon herself. They were dark restless eyes, with a very vivid light in them; an unhealthy-looking brightness, which

we are apt to associate with the idea of incipient consumption; and they shone out of a face that must once have been very handsome, but which now had a worn-out tired look upon it that considerably impaired its beauty. It was a face which a shrewd observer would have called "scampish;" an insolent, defiant face, which might belong to a man accustomed to be at war with the world. No physiognomist could have pronounced it a pleasant countenance; but to Dorothy Tursgood it seemed the very ideal of heroic splendour.

Away from the realms of agriculture Sir Jasper's bailiff was by no means a keen or minute observer. The eyes of all the officers in Castleford barracks might have been roving towards Dorothy's pretty face, and Mr. James Tursgood none the wiser. He packed his two younger daughters and an ungainly boy into the cart, which had been standing during the service in an adjacent yard, and nodded a good-bye to Dorothy as he clambered into the vehicle.

"No gadding after dark, Doll," he said in a

warning voice; "Selina Dobb's got a house of her own, and a husband to keep her; but you've got to earn your living in service. Don't let me hear no complaints of you when I goes to the Abbey."

Dorothy pouted, and then murmured something dutiful. The farm-bailiff was her father, and she was bound to obey him, though his manners were rather rough; but the society of Alderney cows and squealing young pigs, however lively, can scarcely be expected to have a refining influence. The cart drove away, and Dorothy was left alone in all the grandeur of her velvet bonnet to find her way to that damp little terrace of newly-built houses in which Selina and her husband had taken up their abode.

Dorothy had heard high mass in that little chapel every Sunday morning from her childhood upwards, and there was a good deal of hand-shaking to be gone through with young women of her own age, to say nothing of hobbledehoy brothers and sheepish swains "keeping company" with the young women. There was considerable

discussion about the new bonnet; and when at last Dorothy disengaged herself from her friends, it was ever so much past one. One o'clock was Mr. and Mrs. Dobb's dinner-hour, not of their own free choice, but to suit the habits of an arbitrary baker, who cleared out his oven at that hour, and flung back the joints intrusted to him upon the hands of their owners with a stony indifference as to whether the cloth might be laid, or the beer fetched from the newly-opened tavern.

Dorothy hurried breathlessly across a patch of waste ground, and past the unfinished streets which straggled here and there upon the dusty outskirts of Castleford. The red coats had filed away from the chapel while her father delivered his brief lecture, the two officers walking by the side of the men; and Dorothy had almost forgotten the roving eyes that had seemed so often attracted by her new bonnet. She was close to the new terrace,—it was called Amanda Terrace,—when she became conscious of a footstep behind her, a footstep that loitered when she loitered, and hurried when she hurried. Her breath came

quicker, and her heart began to bump up and down as fast as if she had been running a race. Could any body be following her? The heart that as yet had only panted for new bonnet-ribbons and coral necklaces began all at once to beat with a strange emotion, which seemed a pleasure so intense that it almost merged into pain. Perhaps a poet might believe in this as the earliest thrill of a maiden's first love; but, alas, maidenly vanity had a good deal more to do with it. Dorothy caught a glimpse of her pursuer as she turned a sharp corner; and brief though that glimpse, it was quite long enough to show her a red coat and a pair of brilliant black eyes. Then it was that the bailiff's daughter felt her heart swell with a delicious triumph. She began to think that she had MADE A CONQUEST. A conquest! and she was going to Selina Dobb, who had inflicted upon her the minutest details of so many conquests of a military character, and who had ended by marrying a brewer's-clerk. Oh, how delicious it would be to retire to Selina's bedroom after dinner, on some pretence

of examining the new bonnet, and then and there communicate to her the history of this wonderful triumph!

She was going through a little mental rehearsal of the delightful disclosure, when she came to Amanda Villas, and perceived the lounging figure of Henry Adolphus Dobb, in an intensely cut-away coat, lolling against the little iron gate, and provided with a short clay-pipe, the bowl of which presented the head of a ferociously-disposed bull-dog displaying two rows of enamelled teeth, whose whiteness agreeably contrasted with the blackened clay.

"Holloa!" exclaimed Mr. Dobb, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and addressing himself to Dorothy's pursuer. (Good gracious! thought the bailiff's daughter, could it be possible that her cousin's husband was on familiar terms with a magnificent creature in a scarlet coat?) "How do, Dorothy?" said Mr. Dobb; "sorry to see you looking so sharp set; for the butcher forgot to send the mutton last night. We *might* have dined upon the turnips, but unluckily the green-

grocer's boy has got the measles, so they didn't come; but if the kindly welcome of two honest hearts, and the smell of the dinners from the bakehouse at the corner, content ye, they are yours."

Dorothy was not alarmed by this exordium. She was very well acquainted with the habits of her cousin's husband, who was that social nuisance, a facetious young man; a young man who would have made a bad pun at a funeral, or struck a serio-comic attitude beside the bed of an expiring friend. He was a constant frequenter of music-halls and theatres; believed in himself implicitly as an accomplished mimic and an amateur Charles Mathews. He was a man who considered agreeable conversation utterly incompatible with the smallest admixture of common-sense. He was a perambulatory edition of Mr. Hotten's *Slang Dictionary* and Mr. Maddison Morton's farces; and there was no discussion however solemn, no question however serious, for which he could find any language but slang.

"Pass on, fair damsel, to our modest man-

sion," he said to Dorothy; "I did but jest with thee: the banquet waits within. Ho, my lieutenant, Michael Cassio! what news? Has the royal daughter of the second James departed this life? or have the phlegmatic citizens of Amsterdam possessed themselves of Holland?"

These playful inquiries were addressed to the officer who had followed Dorothy: but that gentleman only replied by a suppressed yawn, and a careless "How d'ye do, Dobb?" He had a lazy indifference, that was far from complimentary to the society in which he happened to find himself; and he had a lounging, loitering gait, which was the very opposite of the attitude-striking and cellar-flap-break-down dancing of the vivacious Dobb, who considered his reputation as a "delightful rattle" in imminent danger whenever adverse circumstances obliged him to hold his tongue and restrain the comic activity of his muscles for five consecutive minutes. The lounging officer was a certain Gervoise Catheron, sub-lieutenant of marines, an acquaintance of the playful Dobb, and an inve-

terate billiard-player. The neutral ground of a billiard-room over a tobacconist's shop in Castleford market-place had brought the brewer's-clerk and the lieutenant together; and some little indulgence displayed by Mr. Dobb with regard to small debts of honour had brought about a kind of intimacy between the two men.

Poor little Dorothy felt quite crestfallen as she entered her cousin Selina's prim best parlour. She had not made a conquest, after all. The dark-eyed officer had not been tracking her footsteps from the chapel to Amanda Villas, but had come that way to see his friend Mr. Dobb. Under the depressing influence of this disappointment, Dorothy was quite indifferent to her cousin's critical remarks upon her new bonnet.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Selina, looking out of the window, "there's Henry Adolphus talking to one of his military friends. He is such a favourite with the officers! but they don't often come down *this* way; Amanda Villas are so *very* retired."

Dorothy's heart, dull and sluggish of beat

for the last five minutes, began to flutter with revived hope. "Have you ever seen that gentleman before?" she asked shyly.

"Well, I can't call to mind that I have. But Henry Adolphus is *so* intimate with the officers. He is so very lively, you know, and his society is so much sought after."

The two women stood at the window, screened by a little stand of geraniums and the voluminous festoons of a pair of stiffly-starched white curtains, knitted by Selina's industrious hands. They watched Mr. Dobb and his companion with admiring interest; Selina impressed by her husband's distinguished talents, and rejoicing in the idea of those envious feelings that were likely to be aroused in the breasts of her neighbours by this exhibition of Mr. Dobb's intimate relations with a sub-lieutenant of marines.

The officer lounged away presently; but his departing speech must have been as a dagger in the breast of any listening neighbour:

"Good day to you, Dobb. I'll look round again in the afternoon for a smoke."

He nodded, and departed very slowly, with a listless step and many a furtive glance towards the leafy screen behind which Dorothy was watching. She saw the glances, and sat down to her cousin's dinner-table with cheeks that bloomed like peonies, to be rallied upon her blushes by the brewer's-clerk.

"'My love is like the red, red rose,' which is frequently sung out of tune. I know all about it, Dorothy; and the gentleman might be considered eminently handsome if it wasn't for his red hair and the popular prejudice against a decided goggle. *I* consider a hump rather an advantage than otherwise, as a man's coat-collar sits all the better for it," exclaimed Mr. Dobb as he flourished his carving-knife and fork above a baked shoulder of mutton. "You know your own degrees: sit down; 'the funeral baked meats,' &c. &c. How's the governor, Dorothy? all serene? And our estimable friend, the Baronet? I hope he didn't take my refusal of his last invitation to dinner *too* much to heart. I appreciate his friendly intentions, but the society of the aged

bloke is apt to pall upon the youthful intellect; and at his last feed I had occasion to complain of the viands. The tripe and onions were overdone; the fricasseed beef-sausages were not up to the mark; the iced pudding was sloppy; and the champagne the ham was stewed in was *not* Cliquot. I forgive him. 'Cassio, I love thee; but never more be officer of mine!'"

Dorothy ate her dinner almost in silence, and ate very little. The agreeable Dobb only required an occasional admiring giggle to keep him going for a whole afternoon; so the bailiff's daughter was not called upon to talk much. After dinner she sat on the hard little horsehair sofa by her cousin Selina, and discussed a heavenly sleeve and an enchanting trimming on the cross, which, according to Mrs. Dobb, had only just "come up;" while the facetious Henry Adolphus brewed a small jug full of a certain rum-and-gin punch, known among his intimates as "Dobb's mixture," being a cunning admixture of liquors originally devised by that gentleman, and the compounding of which was such a soul-absorb-

ing occupation as to keep him comparatively quiet.

It was half-past three o'clock when Gervoise Catheron lounged past the window, in mufti this time. Dorothy's cheeks grew red as she recognised him. The sofa was opposite the window, and Dorothy had been stealing little furtive glances athwart Selina's geraniums ever since dinner. Perhaps he would not come, after all; or he might come very late, and Dorothy was to go back to the Abbey before dusk, and it would be dark so very, very soon this November afternoon.

"'Open, locks, whoever knocks!'" bawled Mr. Dobb, as the lieutenant went by the railings; "the footman has been abruptly dismissed on account of intemperant proclivities, and the family plate is at our banker's, so the door is only on the latch. 'Turn, gentle hermit,' turn the handle, and shove the lower panels of our portal; for the paint,

'Infected by the dampness of the air,
Is sticky, and doth cling, like woman's lips

That meet the false lips of deceitful man,
And drink the poison of a traitor's kiss.'

Lines from an unfinished epic by H. A. Dobb, Esq., poet-laureate to her Majesty the Queen of the Cannibal Islands."

While Mr. Dobb had been thus giving free indulgence to a humorous fancy, his sensible better-half had opened the door and admitted the distinguished guest, who looked as much out of his element in the prim little parlour as he had looked in the chapel. He dropped listlessly into the chair offered him by Mrs. Dobb, and languidly accepted the glass of punch presented to him by Henry Adolphus, who had contrived to make the room fragrant with the odours of lemon-peel and rum.

Mr. Dobb introduced his wife and his wife's cousin to his friend Gervoise Catheron with divers facetious flourishes of the music-hall order. Poor little Dorothy could only sit with her eyelids cast down under the glances of the officer. He made a languid attempt to talk to her, but she only answered him by monosyllables; and as the lively

Dobb very rarely held his tongue for two minutes together, the conversation was a very brief one. Gervoise Catheron asked her a few questions. Did she object to the smell of cigar-smoke? did she live near Roxborough? was she going home that evening?

Mrs. Dobb's maid-of-all-work brought in a tea-tray while the two men were smoking and drinking, and Selina explained that they were going to drink tea much earlier than usual, in order to escort their cousin as far as Scarsdale Park before night.

"Dorothy is living as — as companion with Miss Denison," said Mrs. Dobb, who could not bring herself to pronounce that humiliating word 'lady's maid' before her aristocratic guest; "and it's a long walk from here to Scarsdale — three miles to the Park, and quite a mile from the park-gates to the Abbey; but Henry Adolphus likes a nice long walk, so we promised to see Dorothy as far as the gates."

Mr. Catheron replied that he resembled Mr. Dobb in that respect, inasmuch as there was no-

thing he liked better than a long walk on a fine winter evening; and he volunteered to accompany the Dobbs and their cousin as far as Scarsdale. Dorothy's heart set up an actual tumult after this. Ah, it certainly was a conquest; and surely her triumph must be perceived by Selina, who had been so very quick to discern any of her own victories over the susceptible military lounging in the High Street, in which the fair young milliner served her apprenticeship.

The two women talked of Mr. Catheron as they put on their bonnets in an upper chamber; but Selina evidently considered the charms of her husband's society quite sufficient attraction to lure all the officers in the *Army List* to Amanda Villas; so Dorothy's gratified vanity swelled her breast to bursting, and had no chance of an outlet in friendly sympathy. She went downstairs, blooming radiantly in her new bonnet, and found that Mr. Dobb and his friend had finished the punch and were smoking their cigars on the doorstep. The two men made way for Mrs. Dobb and her cousin, and they all left the house in rather strag-

gling order; but Mr. Catheron somehow happened to be next Dorothy, and he was not slow to seize upon his advantage.

"Give your wife your arm, Dobb," he said; "I'll take care of Miss —— I beg your pardon, I didn't quite hear your name just now."

"Tursgood," murmured Dorothy.

"Tursgood—that's not such a pretty name as Dorothy. Do you know you're the first Dorothy I ever met with, except one, and she's a historical personage?"

"I know history; Miss Marcia taught me. Was it Sophia Dorothea, who was married to George the First, and very unhappy?—poor thing! and, oh, how I hate that wicked Countess of Platen who trampled on Count Konigsmark's face! Was it Sophia Dorothea you meant?"

"No, I mean Dorothy Varden, the blacksmith's daughter. Do you know I think you're something like her, Miss Tursgood?"

"You are fond of novels, sir," cried Dorothy.

"No, I am not; I find 'em confoundedly slow nowadays: used to read 'em when I was a boy;

read nothing now but Holt's betting-lists and the *Sunday Times*."

It was a long way from Castleford to Scarsdale Park, but it seemed very short to Dorothy; and yet Mr. Catheron was far from the most amiable or intellectual companion a young woman could have. He had very little to say for himself; and what he did say was chiefly expressive of hatred and contempt for every body and every thing in the world, and a profound sense of the ill-usage he had suffered at the hands of people who had injured and insulted him by getting on better than himself. He was not an agreeable companion; he was only a good-looking scamp, with a handsome face, worn and faded by late hours and hard drinking; but he was just the sort of man who can generally find any number of women ready to lend him money and adore him. Poor little Dorothy had never walked arm-in-arm with an officer before, and the happiness engendered out of gratified vanity imparted a factitious charm to the society of her companion. She was very happy—as happy as a child who wears a

woman's dress for the first time, with all a child's ignorance of the heritage of care and sorrow which may go along with that apparel of womanhood.

The great bare trees in Scarsdale Park looked black against a moonlight sky when Dorothy bade good-bye to her friends at the gates. A son of the lodge-keeper was to escort her thence to the Abbey, so the Dobbs had no need of any further anxiety about her.

"Good night, Selina; good night, Mr. Dobb; I am so much obliged to you for coming this long way."

"A long way!" cried Mr. Catheron; "by Jove! it's been the shortest walk I ever took in my life."

He could see Dorothy's blushes in the moonlight as she dropped him a little curtsey and murmured good-night before she tripped away upon the silver-shining sward with the lodge-keeper's boy by her side.

She was scarcely out of sight of the gates when she broke into a skipping step that was almost a dance, and then a little thrilling song

came gushing from her lips like the joyous warbling of some happy bird.

And it was all because she had made a conquest. Conceited little Dorothy, foolish little Dorothy, to think so much of a few stereotyped compliments from a good-looking scamp.

Mr. Dobb was not so well pleased with the employment of his Sabbath evening.

"It may be very jolly to have swell acquaintances," he remarked to his wife, as he ate his supper; "but my friend in the spurs has consumed my last cabana, and imbibed by far the larger modicum of the ambrosian beverage brewed for the general joy of the whole table; to say nothing of his borrowing half-a-sovereign from me when we parted company in the High Street just now."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNWELCOME LETTER.

MARCIA DENISON sat in a comfortable little nook by the fire-place in the amber drawing-room, whose shrouded grandeurs had something of a ghastly look in the chill wintry light. Christmas was close at hand, and Marcia was employed in carrying out certain arrangements for the comfort of her poor, in conjunction with the curate of Scarsdale, a very simple-minded young man, and a devoted admirer of Miss Denison, whose serene presence was apt to affect him with a temporary paralysis of his intellectual faculties.

Yes, he was a very meek young man; with smooth flaxen hair, which no amount of manipulation from the hot tongs of the village barber could have tortured into curl; and mild blue eyes, whose gentleness of expression almost melted into

a watery weakness, suggestive of cold in the head. He was not a happy young man, for he despised himself, and he adored Miss Denison; but he would have died any manner of death — from being hurled headlong from the topmost pinnacle of Roxborough Cathedral, to being torn piecemeal by half-a-dozen of the big draught-horses on Sir Jasper's home-farm — rather than have rendered up the secret of his idolatry; for Miss Denison was an heiress, and it was possible that his devoted love might have been confounded with the mercenary yearning of the fortune-hunter. So Mr. Winstanley Silbrook allowed concealment to feed upon his damask cheek, and only regretted that the agonies of his hidden passion did not consume the peachy and unromantic bloom of his beardless visage. He would like to have carried his sufferings on his brow, inscribed in unmistakable characters, which Marcia must have read every time she saw him, and which might in the end have inspired the placid love that grows out of pity—a sentiment which is as the weakest skim-milk when compared with the fire-water of a genuine un-

reasoning affection. There is no social law which forbids a man to carry what characters he pleases upon his brow; and the delicacy which prevented Mr. Silbrook revealing his passion in any form of words could not have hindered him from avowing it in every feature of his face. But unluckily he was not gifted with what is generally called a speaking face. He might have carried the secrets of an empire under that mild and meaningless mask, more inscrutable than the marble brow of a Napoleon, looming massively above unfathomable eyes. His heart had been slowly breaking for the last three months, and there were no outward tokens of the ruin within; unless, indeed, occasional pimples — with an obstinate tendency to gather on a forehead which, but for pimples, might have been Shakespearian, and apt to muster stealthily in the dead of the night, like a rising of Chartists on Kennington Common — might be taken as evidence of the inward struggle for ever going on behind that brow.

Mr. Silbrook was the most modest of men; but if he had a strong point, he felt that strong

point was his brow. To-day he had brushed his smooth flaxen hair away from the bony prominences which phrenologists had mapped-out for him in the most flattering manner, and he presented a shiny expanse of forehead to Miss Denison's contemplative eyes. He was painfully nervous in the presence of his divinity, and it was a considerable relief to him this morning to find that Marcia was not alone. Dorothy Tursgood was seated before a little table at some distance from her mistress, ready to act as secretary, and swelling with the importance of her duty. The business was rather a long one; but the curate was unutterably happy, deliciously ill at ease, in a tumult of love and sheepishness, as he sat opposite to Miss Denison, with a list of names in his hand, and suggested the people who were to receive help, and the kind of help most required by them. If the list could have gone on and on, like the endless web in a paper-mill,—if he could have sat upon that hearth-rug for ever, with his shining forehead reflecting the glow of the fire, and incipient pimples basking in the ruddy blaze,

—how happy he might have been! But the clocks never stop, except in fairy-tales, where the princesses go to sleep for a century at a stretch, to wake, beautiful and smiling, when Prince Charming comes to claim them. The gray old boatman never lays down his oars: the "plish-plash" goes on for ever,—even when our ears are beguiled by sweeter sounds into a fatal unconsciousness of that solemn measure. Winstanley Silbrook, sitting in the amber drawing-room at Scarsdale, forgot that he had any other duty than that of assisting Miss Denison in her benevolent arrangements; and even when the business was finished, he loitered still, very loath to dissolve the spell which bound him to that comfortable hearth.

"I have ordered luncheon for you in the dining-room, Mr. Silbrook," Marcia said, during the pause that succeeded the completion of the morning's business. "You know papa's habits; he takes nothing but a biscuit and a little wine-and-water between breakfast and dinner; so you will excuse his joining you. I am quite an old maid myself, and take a cup of tea at this time."

The curate blushed violently, and underwent a sharp attack of that mental paralysis to which he was subject in Miss Denison's society. He was thinking how some bold adventurer, some penniless Irishman in the military line, might have struck in here with a florid protestation against the epithet 'old maid,' as applied to the loveliest and most bewitching of womankind. The very thought of what the audacious adventurer might have said was too much for Mr. Silbrook, who felt his bashfulness blazing in his cheeks, and burning in every incipient pimple on his brow.

"No, thank you, Miss Denison," he said, shifting his hat nervously from one hand to the other; "I very rarely take luncheon, or, indeed, any thing at this time, unless perhaps dinner; three o'clock being, in point of fact, my usual dinner-hour—or would-be usual—except that my duties render me so very uncertain. No, thank you; really, I would rather not; and, in fact, I—" dropping his hat and looking at his watch; and then picking up his hat before returning his watch to his waistcoat-pocket—"thank you, no; must

really be going, for my duties at this time are so—" decides in favour of the watch—"multi—numer—mult—" strikes upon a verbal rock, and goes to pieces—"numer-farious."

But in spite of the solemn call of duty, the curate seemed inclined to linger, standing on the hearth-rug, with his hat in his hand, and some demoniac impulse within his breast prompting him every moment to put his elbow on the broad marble chimney-piece, and sweep away a small fortune in the shape of old Dresden and Chelsea ware. He looked with a despairing gaze at a little tea-tray which was brought in presently for Miss Denison, as an unhappy wretch who had just swallowed poison might look towards the vessel containing its only antidote.

"If you will not take any luncheon, you will perhaps take a cup of tea and a biscuit," Marcia said kindly. "Fetch another cup and saucer, Dorothy."

The curate stammered something unintelligibly expressive of rapture, and seated himself placidly, after putting his hat in the coal-scuttle. Those

large watery blue eyes were of very little use to him unassisted by spectacles; and the admiring gaze which dwelt so fondly upon Marcia Denison only saw an indistinct white shadow, with features that flickered in and out like gas burning in a high wind.

Dorothy waited on Miss Denison and her guest, and handed Mr. Silbrook his cup of tea and the sugar-basin, at which he made little pecks with the tongs like a short-sighted bird. He sat with his cup sliding backwards and forwards in his saucer, conversing in nervous jerks; and he stirred his tea more persistently than is compatible with easy manners.

"Yes, Miss Denison," he began. The "yes" bore no relation to any thing that preceded it, but was only a kind of conversational header, by which the curate plunged desperately into the trackless ocean of small-talk. "Yes, Miss Denison, I was about to observe that—thank you; not any more." This to Dorothy, who hovered over the afflicted young man with the sugar-basin and a plate of biscuits, to his torment and distraction; for he had

already found that a biscuit was the incarnation of a hard dry cough; and he had been for the last five minutes struggling under a perfect shower-bath of crumbs. "Yes, Miss—Cracknells—I was about to say that the poor have every reason to congratulate themselves upon their good fortune this winter—last year—the biscuits—er—cold—being peculiarly severe." Here Mr. Silbrook weakly yielded to the tempter, and took another instrument of torture, obtrusively branded with the names of its makers, which glared at him as he conversed. "The weather, as I have observed, was really very severe; and the Abbey being untenanted—though your housekeeper, I am sure, was a great assistance to us in the way of soup and coals; but this year we are much better off, as, beyond your most valuable coöperation, we have an anonymous benefactor."

"An anonymous benefactor?"

"Yes, Miss Denison," responded the curate, who had been imprudent enough to bite his biscuit, in the expectation of a much longer pause in the conversation, and found himself sputtering in

a floury manner that redoubled his confusion. "Yes, Miss Denison; we have an anonymous benefactor. Upon the first Sunday of every month, for the last six or seven months, a sum of money,—gold wrapped in a bank-note, sometimes to the amount of ten pounds, sometimes more,—has been dropped into our poor-box—no one has been able to discover by whom. There has been no direction as to how the money was to be appropriated—no scrap of writing, not even the initials of the donor; only the money. I need not tell you that we have done our best to dispose of it wisely."

"And you have never made any guess as to the identity of the person who gives this money?"

"Never. Our congregation is small, and, with the exception of two or three families, by no means rich. I have heard," said the curate, forgetting his bashfulness in the gusto with which he discussed what was evidently a favourite subject,—"I have heard, Miss Denison, of people committing DREADFUL CRIMES, and giving large sums of money to the poor ever afterwards; though it is

difficult to imagine by what mode of reasoning these unhappy heathens can arrive at the conclusion, that giving money which you don't want to people you haven't injured, can atone for the wrong done to the people you have injured. But the human mind is—the er—human mind," repeated Mr. Silbrook hopelessly; finding himself suddenly involved in a philosophical argument, from whose appalling entanglements he saw no chance of extrication; "the human mind is—no, thank you." This to Dorothy, who assails him with a second cup of tea. "Really, Miss Denison, I have intruded upon you so long, that—er—*good*-morning.".

Marcia shook hands with him, and dismissed him with a cordial smile. She had no idea that the hopeless gaze of those mild blue eyes meant idolatry; she ascribed their pensively imploring expression to constitutional weakness.

At twenty-two Marcia was quite a woman, and felt old enough to look serenely down upon bashful curates with almost a motherly kindness. She sat for some time looking idly at the fire after

Mr. Silbrook had left her, while Dorothy sewed meekly in her retired corner, and mused wonderingly upon the mysterious patron of the Scarsdale poor. But by and by Miss Denison aroused herself suddenly from her reverie, and took an open letter from a table near her,—a letter written on foreign paper, in a feminine hand; a hand which was bold and dashing, and masculine in character, but still very obviously a woman's hand; for surely the man never yet lived who underlined every other word and adorned every *y* and *g* with a loop an inch long. Marcia read the letter, which was a very long one, with a thoughtful expression on her face, and then rose from her low chair and left the room, with the flimsy sheets of paper still in her hand. Dorothy looked after her mistress with a wondering expression. Marcia Denison, so calm and placid, had been obviously disturbed and moodily thoughtful to-day since the arrival of the morning-post and that flimsy foreign letter.

Miss Denison went straight to the library, where her father was sitting before an enormous

fire, with a pile of reviews and newspapers on a table by his side. He tossed a paper away from him with an impatient gesture as Marcia entered the room.

"If people would only find something to write about before they take up their pens!" he muttered; "but then I suppose there are times in which the literature of the world would come to a dead stop, universal bankruptcy. And to think that we should read any trash just because it happens to have been written yesterday, while the dust gathers upon volumes that hold the garnered wisdom of departed Titans! A man poisons his wife in Seven Dials to-day, and we are ready to wade through half-a-dozen pages of evidence in small type to-morrow, while perhaps not one amongst ten of us would care to lift the mouldering folios that contain the trials of a Strafford and a Stuart, a Russell and a Sidney, from their forgotten places on our bookshelves. Heigho!" exclaimed the Baronet, breaking down into a long dreary yawn; "what do you want, Marcia? The curate has gone, I suppose, and the benevolent

business is over? What letter is that in your hand, Marcia?"

"A letter from Mrs. Harding, the handsome widow whom we saw so much of at Homburg. Do you remember giving her a kind of general invitation to visit us here?"

Sir Jasper yawned and reflected.

"Did I invite her? Yes, it's very likely I did; a charming woman, vivacious, *spirituelle*, plays *écarté* as well as any *gandin* who has served his apprenticeship at a crack club in the Rue Royale; sings a little, doesn't she, Spanish and German ballads, with an accompaniment on the guitar? Ah, yes, I remember her perfectly, and remember being very much pleased with her,—a florid style of woman, but amazingly agreeable. Let her come, by all means. When does she talk of coming?"

"Almost immediately; that is to say, between this and Christmas. I'll read you the passage in her letter."

Marcia turned over the flimsy leaves, and selected a paragraph in one of them.

"'And now, dearest Miss Denison, I am going

to ask your permission to avail myself of your accomplished papa's more than cordial invitation—'"

"More than cordial," muttered the Baronet; "what a pity that cordiality is a kind of intellectual effervescence, which expires as it effervesces! I had forgotten the existence of the woman. Go on, Marcia."

"'Your papa's more than cordial invitation, so often repeated during that delightful stay at Homburg, in which I so enjoyed your congenial society. May I come, dear Miss Denison? I am such a frank spontaneous creature myself, that I accept your dear papa's kind speeches at their fullest value—as I am sure I may—may I not, dear Miss Denison?'"

"You may as well omit the dear Miss Denisons and the dear papas," exclaimed Sir Jasper, testily. "How I execrate a woman's letter! Is she coming, or is she not?"

"'So,'" continued Marcia, "'if your house is not already full of visitors, I shall be very glad to spend Christmas with you. I have been stay-

ing in Paris since I left Homburg, and my friends here are kindly anxious to keep me still longer; but my heart yearns for an English Christmas, and for long pleasant talks with you and your dear papa. Therefore, dear Miss Denison, I shall await one word from you to say yes or no; and if the answer be 'yes,' I shall cross immediately, spend a day or two in London, and then make my way to Scarsdale Abbey.' What is the answer to be, papa?"

"Yes, by all means. The woman has been invited, and the woman must come. She was very agreeable at Homburg; but I'm afraid she'll be a little too florid for England. However, at the worst, she'll amuse us."

"But, papa," said Marcia, thoughtfully, "have you ever considered how little we know of her? Our acquaintance was such an accidental one; and—she was not in the best set at Homburg."

Sir Jasper shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What do I know about best or worst sets?" he exclaimed. "The woman amused me. She seemed to know plenty of people; and she is a

lady—of the florid order, certainly. She curtsies gracefully, knows how to get in and out of a carriage without plunging, has hands which have never done any work, and can eat asparagus or artichokes without making herself disagreeable; and then she is remarkably handsome, and dresses divinely. I should give five or six hundred pounds for a good example of Etty, without the dress. Mrs. Harding's flesh-tints are finer than Etty's, and her draperies are as good as Stothard's; so why should we not have her to light up our rooms in this dreary winter weather?"

"But I thought you had set your face against society, papa."

"Yes, against county society,—the ordinary jog-trot sort of thing which goes on for ever; but I have no objection to an occasional visitor. A passing pilgrim newly arrived from Vanity Fair will be welcome; and he shall rest himself at our hearth, and bring us tidings of the dancing-booths and the circuses and the merry-go-rounds, the newest delusions of the popular political prestigiator, the mountebanks who are in

luck, and the mountebanks who are out of luck; the births and deaths and marriages, the bankruptcies and divorces, the family quarrels and fashionable scandals, and all the fun of the fair. Don't look at me so despondently, Marcia; but write a civil letter to Mrs. Harding, telling her to come."

"I don't think she will care to stay very long in an empty house, papa. She seemed to me a person who could scarcely exist without gaiety and excitement."

"In that case let her go away and exist somewhere else. Besides, we shall not be quite alone; Mr. Pauncefort will spend Christmas with us, and he can help to amuse her."

"Oh, papa, Mr. Pauncefort is the very last person in all the world to suit Mrs. Harding."

"Good gracious me, Marcia!" cried Sir Jasper, peevishly, "how many more objections are you going to make? I tell you again the woman has been asked to come, and the woman must be allowed to come. If she doesn't like us, she can leave us; if we don't like her, we needn't ask her

a second time. Go and write your letter, and don't be persistent, Marcia."

"Very well, papa; it must be as you please."

The letter was written. It was not a very cordial letter; for Miss Denison did not like Mrs. Harding, and was quite unable to feign a liking which she did not feel. But the epistle was courteous and conciliatory, and the answer came by return of post. Mrs. Harding acknowledged her dearest Miss Denison's affectionate letter, and announced her intended arrival at the Abbey on the twenty-second of December.

CHAPTER IX.

A FLORID WIDOW.

THE shrill winter winds shrieked among the rocking branches in Scarsdale Wood, and howled dismally all through the long moonless nights in which Sir Jasper's tenant lay awake in the darkness, thinking of all the eight-and-thirty years that lay behind him, and of the near horizon that bounded his present life.

Little as we know of him, we may take it for granted that there has been failure and disappointment of some kind within the compass of those eight-and-thirty years. A man does not voluntarily spend the prime of his manhood in desultory wanderings amid the wildest regions of the earth, and return to his native country only to bury himself in the dusky recesses of a wood, without some very strong reason for his conduct.

If George Pauncefort was a poor man, the world was all before him; and he was no listless idler likely to hold himself aloof from the battle-field of life because the contest was hot and fierce, and the crown of victory uncertain. The smouldering fires of an energetic and passionate nature were hidden under the quiet of his breast, now so seldom stirred by any violent emotion; a look, a word, a sudden outburst of the man's actual self predominating for a moment over the calm presentment of himself which he offered to the world betrayed the slumbering force, the hidden fire. A lion reconciled to his narrow cage, and feeding meekly from the hands of his keeper, will show himself king of the forest now and then, despite the excellence of his taming; and there were moments in which Sir Jasper's tenant rebelled against the chains he had imposed upon himself. These were the times in which he was wont to turn his back upon the calm quiet of his hermitage and the grave companionship of his beloved books, to tramp over gray moorlands and climb bleak hill-tops under a sunless winter sky. These were the

times in which he was wont to start upon that walking-match with Satan, at whose weary close he was sometimes fain to confess himself beaten, and to bring the fiend home with him to his quiet retreat, to occupy the empty chair at his hearth, and to glare hideously at him athwart the fumes of his faithful meerschaum. Sometimes he was victorious, and out-walked the demon, parting company with him amongst the shrill winds upon a heathy ridge of moorland, to tramp homeward cheerily, with his face towards the sky, and all the angry fires vanished out of his eyes.

Mr. Pauncefort had spent a great deal of his time under the bleak winter sky since his visit to the Abbey; but he had returned to the Hermitage a few days before Christmas to find a note from Sir Jasper lying amongst the newspapers on his table; a note which reminded him in very cordial terms of his promise to spend Christmas at the Abbey, and claimed the fulfilment of that promise.

George Pauncefort twisted the little missive round and round his strong fingers, as he stood

by the window looking out at the withered fern and the leafless underwood swaying and creaking drearily in the wind.

"Shall I go?" he thought. "Why not? Is there any danger to *her* in my presence? Not a jot! Have I not seen her clear gray eyes fixed upon me with such a tender calmness as may shine in them when she looks at her father? What if I am a passionate fool, who has learnt no lesson from a blighted youth and a wasted manhood? what if I am a fool in my dotage, and long to lay my heart and soul at the feet of an angel, as I laid them once before the hidden foot of a fiend? Will *she* be the worse for my folly? What can I seem to her but an elderly misanthrope, whom she tolerates out of the pitiful tenderness of her nature, as she tolerates tiresome old women in Scarsdale village, and noisy children at the Sunday school? It is one of the Christian duties of her life to be kind to such a man as I; and if there is danger in her kindness, it is a danger that threatens me, and me alone. Yes, I will go."

It was on the twenty-second of December that Mr. Pauncefort arrived at this decision. He ordered his servant to prepare for the visit to the Abbey, and to be ready to accompany him there on the twenty-fourth; and in the mean while he buried himself amongst his books, and lay awake in the moonless nights thinking of his past life. It is strange how perpetually the dreaded ghosts of that remote past had haunted him of late, and how often in his dreams the voices of the dead sounded in his ears, while youthful faces, whose bloom and freshness had long vanished from this earth, smiled upon him, and mocked him with their vivid semblance of reality.

Mrs. Harding, the handsome widow whose acquaintance Sir Jasper and his daughter had made in the Kursaal at Homburg, arrived at Scarsdale on the day mentioned in her letter, with a paraphernalia that augured a long visit. One of the Abbey carriages attended the lady's coming, and conveyed her from the station. Sir Jasper met her at the great entrance, and conducted her to

the amber drawing-room, where Marcia was sitting before the piano playing softly to herself in the dusk.

"My dear Miss Denison,—dear Sir Jasper,—this is so kind of you!" exclaimed the lady, though the kindness of her host and hostess had been somewhat of a negative order, and had consisted chiefly in their allowing her to take advantage of a half-forgotten invitation; "and what an exquisite place you have here! I am charmed with every thing. Those dear stately oaks, even in winter, how grand and noble they look! I had imagined Scarsdale Abbey *almost* a royal residence, but *not* such a palace as it really is. Your pictures, even in this firelight, I see are delicious. That's an Etty in the corner, there,—yes, I'm sure it is; and there's my old friend Mulready above that ebony cabinet. But, dear Sir Jasper, dear Miss Denison, how well you are both looking! I can see that even in *this* uncertain light," exclaimed the widow, suddenly remembering that her friends, who were both standing with their backs to the low fire, might

have been galvanised corpses, and she none the wiser.

"You must be tired, after travelling in this abominable weather," said Sir Jasper, suppressing a yawn. "Shall Marcia show you your rooms? I suppose they have told your maid where she is to carry all those fragile bonnet-boxes and precious morocco bags, which a well-trained Abigail never intrusts to the rough grasp of the ruder sex."

"Dear Sir Jasper," exclaimed Mrs. Harding, revealing a set of teeth that glittered in the dim firelight, "I have no maid. I am quite a woman of the world, and have dispensed with that perpetual encumbrance, a confidential maid, ever since I have been old enough to travel without the protection of a female companion. I am one of the most self-reliant creatures that ever lived; and my habits could be scarcely more simple if I were compelled to exist upon the pension of a captain's widow, instead of enjoying the very comfortable fortune left me by my dear husband. But *you* will not be surprised at this, Miss Deni-

son; for I know how independent you are in your habits."

"My daughter has a little maid who has been her *protégée* ever since she was old enough to patronise any thing, and whom she treats very much as other young ladies treat their lap-dogs. However, I am sure you are tired," exclaimed Sir Jasper, struggling politely with another yawn, "and Marcia shall show you your rooms."

The widow protested against her dear Miss Denison's taking so much trouble; but Marcia was politely decided, and led the way to a handsome suite of rooms at the head of the grand staircase; spacious chambers, with dark crimson draperies, and massive furniture that loomed duskily in the warm glow of noble fires. The wax-candles burning on a dressing-table made only a spot of brightness in the large bedchamber.

"What delicious rooms!" cried the widow, peering about her in the firelight; "and how happy I mean to be in them! Dear Miss Denison, I can scarcely express to you how pleased I am to see you once more. We were *so* happy

together at Homburg, were we not, dear? And to spend a real old English Christmas with you in this noble old Abbey; which seems positively brimful of romance and mystery! Oh, how delightful it will be! And you really have chosen these rooms for me,—these bright glowing rooms, which look like perfect temples of comfort and luxury. I *must* kiss you once more, you dear, kind, thoughtful darling."

Mrs. Harding pounced upon Marcia, and embraced her with effusion. Miss Denison received the embrace with a quiet gentleness. She did not like Mrs. Harding, but she felt that she had no justification for disliking her, and she was very anxious to conquer that unjustifiable sentiment. That poet was only a benighted heathen from whose verses we derive our familiar rhyme about Dr. Fell; and our Christian creed cannot tolerate any such thing as an unreasoning antipathy to a fellow-creature.

"And your rooms are near here, I hope? No? I am so sorry for that; I wanted to feel myself always close to you. We must play and sing all

our old duets again, dear Miss Denison—and, oh! will you allow me to call you Marcia?" cried the widow, with one of those sudden gushes of emotion which were so frequent in her discourse.

How could Miss Denison reply except in the affirmative?

"Call me whatever you please, I shall be very happy," she murmured, looking down.

The thoughts which the flattering request called up in Marcia Denison's mind were not very pleasant ones. She was thinking how few people had ever called her by her Christian name; and how, since her sister's death, no lips had ever spoken it with any tenderness of expression. Mrs. Harding's gushing friendliness chilled her to the very heart, for it reminded her that there was such a thing as affection, though it never came to her. She felt like a child who, far away from home, responds faintly to the mechanical caresses of her noisy schoolfellows, remembering the mother's soft bosom, the mother's tender voice murmuring low words of love.

"And you will call me Blanche, won't you,

Marcia? Marcia! what a beautiful name it is! to me there always seems something regal in the sound of it. And Blanche is a pretty name, *pas vrai, ma bien chérie?*" demanded Mrs. Harding, who, amongst her gushing ways, had the habit of gushing every now and then into a foreign language.

"Yes, it is a very pretty name," replied Miss Denison, wondering how she should ever bring herself to address this gorgeous widow by so girlish and sentimental an appellation; and then, as Mrs. Harding threw up the lid of a gigantic leather trunk, in which bright-coloured silk dresses and festal decorations of an alarming character were visible, Marcia added, "I fear you will find our house a very dull one. You know that papa has quite secluded himself from general society since my poor sister's death. It is an understood thing in the county that we neither visit nor receive visits; and with the exception of one neighbour and friend who comes to us in the most unceremonious manner, I doubt if you will see any one but ourselves."

"Then, my darling Marcia, how delightful to

me to feel that *I* am received where others, doubtless infinitely more deserving, are excluded! At Homburg, where you and your dear papa lived so very quietly, I was inexpressibly flattered by the manner in which he admitted me to his confidence. I shall always love *Galignani;* for, if you remember, dear Marcia, our acquaintance arose out of the absurdly trivial accident of your papa offering me that journal in the reading-room; and then he made some little remark about the place and the people, and then in the next few minutes we seemed quite old friends. And on the following day he introduced me to *you,* darling; and I felt at once that I had found a congenial spirit. Oh, in this weary waste of life," cried Mrs. Harding with another gush, "what is there so precious as a congenial spirit?"

This was one of those questions which the heroine in a melodrama generally addresses to the chandelier, and which are not supposed to require any special answer.

"Can my little Dorothy be of any use to you?" inquired Marcia. "She is by no means an

accomplished maid, but she is very neat and quick in all she does, and I think you would find her intelligent. Shall I send her?"

"No, darling, — thanks. I am so extremely independent, and I really have been so long accustomed to do every thing for myself, that I should be a little bored by the assistance of a maid."

This was quite true. In these days, in which Israelitish practitioners undertake to render beauty eternal, — while *ci-devant* Abigails advertise their readiness to impart the last method of "making-up the face and eyes" for the small consideration of a few postage-stamps, — there are secrets in some toilettes which will not bear the searching eye of an attendant.

Mrs. Harding was a very handsome woman of the florid order; but she was of an age which the tongue of detraction alluded to vaguely as the wrong side of forty; while even friendship unwillingly confessed that her eight-and-thirtieth birthday was a stage upon the highway of life which lay behind this gorgeous widow. How

much of that massive coil of raven tresses which adorned the back of her well-shaped head was an integral part of the head it decorated,—how much of that delicate bloom upon her plump oval cheek owed its rosy freshness to the pencil of Nature,—how far the fruity crimson of the pouting lips took its colour from the warm life-blood beneath the dewy surface, were so many mysteries which Mrs. Harding, in her most gushing moments, had contrived to keep safely locked in her own breast.

"What do I care how the woman obtains her beauty, provided she is beautiful?" said Sir Jasper, discussing this subject, after an evening spent in the widow's society. "Shall I bother myself, when I look at one of Etty's nymphs, about the colours the artist has employed in creating her? What do I care how much vermilion or what artful glaze of *jaune de Mars* has been necessary to warm those glowing limbs into life and loveliness?—or whether the loose rain of rippling hair that veils my goddess owes its golden glory to yellow ochre or to Naples yellow? What do I want to know, except that she is there, and it is my business to

admire her? My daughter, who kisses me when she bids me good-night, must have no paint upon *her* lips, for she is a part of myself, and I should hold myself dishonoured by any falsehood of hers. But let my lovely visitor resort to what arts she pleases in the manufacture of her loveliness. I applaud her ingenuity, and I thank her for taking so much trouble in order to present a beautiful object for my contemplation."

When the second dinner-bell rang, Mrs. Harding presented herself in the drawing-room, gorgeous in dark-green moiré-antique, old point-lace, and ornaments of *cabochon* emeralds set in filigree gold. Very handsome white shoulders glimmered under the pelerine of old point; a throat that a sculptor would have been glad to model was encircled by the necklet of filigree gold. No one could have denied the widow's claim to be considered a very magnificent woman, even though a few subtle artifices might have been employed to enhance her splendour. She was like one of those fatal lies which are so difficult of disproof—a falsehood with some foundation of truth. An

ugly woman, who patches up her ugliness with simulated roses and lilies, and luxuriant tresses imported from Germany, draws down upon herself shame and confusion. But a beautiful woman, whose artistic fingers do sturdy battle with the hand of Time, is generally forgiven by that nobler half of the creation for whose pleasure she clings so desperately to her waning charms. The rigid simplicity of Marcia Denison's brown-silk dress and smoothly-banded hair served as a kind of foil for the widow's gorgeous demi-toilette and elaborate *chevelure*. But Mrs. Harding seemed to have no idea that she had taken unnecessary trouble to make herself beautiful; and yet she was not a woman likely to willingly waste any effort. To-night she seemed only bent upon making herself agreeable; and yet she was not a woman to make herself agreeable without a motive.

Sir Jasper Denison, looking at this splendid creature lazily through half-closed eyelids, while she gave him a vivacious account of her journey from Paris to Roxborough, with delightful touches

of local colouring, and an almost epigrammatic piquancy of expression,—Sir Jasper, looking at her as he might have contemplated one of his Ettys, or a pretty actress at the *Bouffes Parisiennes*, wondered whether she had any motive for coming to Scarsdale. "I hope she hasn't," he thought; "any thing of that kind would be such a terrible waste of trouble. These florid widows are generally supposed to be so many Macchiavellis in moiré-antique; but I think this one has a perceptive ridge which will save her from any absurd mistake about me. From what I see in the newspapers, I imagine that the honourable method by which the women of the present day endeavour to lay up a provision for their old age is by beguiling some infatuated bachelor into the utterance of sentiments which are as false as the charms that inspire them, and then bringing an action for breach of promise against the recusant admirer. But I think a man must say something, or write something, or commit some small overt act of idiotcy before the action can lie, however ready the lady's witnesses may be to do so; and

in that case I am quite safe, and may admire our charming widow at my ease. She is certainly very handsome; one of Giorgione's Madonnas who has seen the world, and is just a trifle *passée*."

Sir Jasper had put on a dress-coat in honour of his visitor, and the holland draperies had disappeared from the amber drawing-room. The dinner was simple, but in perfect taste; and Mrs. Harding, who was essentially epicurean, enjoyed herself prodigiously, and brightened more and more under the influence of white Hermitage, sparkling Burgundy, and Curaçoa. The dark eyes flashed with bewitching vivacity as the widow entertained her quiet companions with anecdotes about the people she had met in Paris, and deliciously-spiteful epigrams which had obtained reputation for the wits of the Faubourg St. Honoré. Sir Jasper was delighted; and Marcia was amused by a style of conversation which was so entirely foreign to her own idea of what conversation should be, and which was yet so skilfully managed as never to offend even the refined taste of a well-bred English woman. Mrs. Hard-

ing's first evening at Scarsdale passed very pleasantly. She played *écarté* with the Baronet, and sang half-a-dozen duets with Marcia, whose rich contralto harmonised delightfully with the widow's mezzo-soprano; and it was nearly midnight when she wished the Baronet good-night, and went up the broad staircase with her arm affectionately encircling Marcia's waist.

She stopped on the threshold of her door to indulge in a final gush. "In the whole course of my life, dear, which has been a very varied one, I never enjoyed an evening as I have enjoyed to-night. How is it, and why is it, Marcia darling? Need I ask such a question? What delight in all this world is as pure as that which we derive from the society of friends—friends whose sincerity we instinctively trust in; whose friendship is *not* a name, and does *not* follow wealth or fame, or leave the wretch to— My sweet Marcia, what a lovely cameo! I think I never saw a more exquisite head—the gift of your dear papa, I know —I recognise his artistic taste, his warm appreciation of the beautiful! Oh, WHAT a papa

he is!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding, enthusiastically squeezing Marcia's hand, and steering that young lady's candle a little further from her own eyebrows, which were very artistic, but not produced with a view to the immediate proximity of a strong light. "WHAT a papa! so versatile, so deeply read, so fascinating! Oh, what a happy girl you ought to be, dear love, with such a papa!"

Marcia's eyelids drooped under her smiling friend's gaze. These charming women of the feline tribe are so apt to forget that the gentlest touch of a velvet paw may be unpleasant when it lights upon a gaping wound.

"My father has not even yet recovered the shock of my sister's death," Marcia said gravely; "and I can never be to him what she was. I love him very dearly, but—"

The words died away upon her lips. No; not so this smiling widow, with the rosy mouth, which it was so difficult to believe in, morally or physically—not to Blanche Harding could Marcia Denison reveal the one great sorrow of her life. But she received her guest's final embrace and a

little shower of pouncing kisses very submissively, and found herself involuntarily rubbing her forehead, as she went along the corridor leading to her own room, with a vague notion that the rosy lips had stained it.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. HARDING SEES A FAMILIAR FACE.

THE next day was bright and pleasant—a real winter's day, with a cold frosty wind blowing amongst the blackening fern, and crisping the waters of all the ponds in Scarsdale Wood, whereby hope was kindled in the bosoms of enthusiastic skaters; while a sullen despair came down upon hard-riding gentlemen and their retainers; and in half-a-dozen stable-yards in the county might have been seen the living representation of Sir Edwin Landseer's delicious picture.

"There will be a thaw to-morrow," said Sir Jasper, as he cut open the last number of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* by the great fire in his library. "There inevitably is muddy sloppiness and drizzling rain on Christmas-day; as if the rational laws of a rational universe set themselves

against the illustrated-newspaper proprietor's and popular humorist's scorbutic ideal of jolly King Christmas, with a crown of holly, and an impossibly-gigantic punch-bowl emitting incredible blue-and-yellow blazes. Where are the people who keep the ideal Christmas? Has any one ever seen them, or dined with them, or sat in their family-circle after dinner, listening to their ghost-stories, or skirmished with their pretty girls under their mistletoe, or worshipped in their highly-varnished village-church, or shivered in their incredibly snowy streets? Has any one ever met the lawyer who can relate three pages and a half about a singular client, who once came to him on a foggy night, when the boys were playing hide-and-seek in the dusky corners of the inns-of-court; or the elderly maiden lady who, at five minutes' notice, will give you a concise but sentimental account of her dead sister, whose plighted lover was lost on a moor one Christmas-day just seven-and-thirty years ago, and who never smiled again, poor darling, till the very smile she wore, as she stood in the old oriel-window waiting for *him* that Christ-

mas-day, came back to her face as she lay in her coffin, never to leave it more: or the young medical student, who can't tell you any story of his own, but fortunately happens to carry about him the manuscript of a diary kept by a fellow-student, who died of delirium tremens? I suppose there are such people; and very agreeable they must be: but one doesn't meet them. I should think now, if there ever was any one sufficiently eloquent to give a synopsis of a three-volume novel in three pages and a half of very good English at a minute's warning, you, Mrs. Harding, might be that accomplished *improvisatore*. I daresay that you will be able to tell us some mysterious and romantic story about a dead sister tomorrow evening, as we sit by the fire, or as we *should* sit by the fire, if Christmas-day were not inevitably warm and muggy."

Have you ever seen the deadly pallor of the natural complexion revealing itself under an artificial bloom? It is not a pleasant sight; and Sir Jasper almost shuddered as he saw the sudden change upon Mrs. Harding's face.

"Pray forgive me!" he said gently. "I see that I have touched upon a sensitive chord. You have lost a sister very dear to you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Harding replied, quite calmly. "My sister died only last year. I was in mourning for her when I first met you."

The natural warmth had come back to her face. Whatever shock Sir Jasper's random words had inflicted upon her had passed, and left her as self-possessed as usual.

Marcia took her guest for a drive after an early luncheon. It was dusk when the carriage drove into Castleford, after a long round in the country-lanes and byroads. The lamps were lighted in the shops, but there was still a cold yellow glimmer in the west, and a gray light in the wintry sky. By this light Mrs. Harding saw the faces of a couple of young men who were lounging in the doorway of a tobacconist's shop, over which the illuminated windows of a billiard-room looked pale in the expiring daylight. One of the men was Gervoise Catheron, and the other was an ensign in an infantry regiment quartered in Castleford barracks.

The widow turned her head to look at these men, and turned again, and lifted her veil on the second occasion, as if anxious to see them more distinctly, as Miss Denison's barouche drove slowly along the High Street.

Marcia had some shopping to do in Castleford; and the coachman drew up his horses presently before a haberdasher's shop some two or three hundred yards from the billiard-room.

"I will be as quick as possible in making my purchases," Miss Denison said, as she prepared to alight. "Will you come into the shop, or sit in the carriage? Godwin can drive up and down the street, if you find it cold standing still."

"Thanks, dear; no," answered Mrs. Harding rather hurriedly. "I will get out and go back to a stationer's I saw a few doors from here. I forgot all about stationery when I was making my purchases in town. You'll wait for me, won't you, love, if I should be a little longer than you?"

She alighted immediately after Marcia, and hurried away in the dusk. But the splendid widow did not enter the shop of the chief stationer

of Castleford. She passed his door, and went straight to the tobacconist's, on whose threshold the young ensign and the sub-lieutenant of marines were still lounging in listless attitudes, smoking the tobacconist's finest Cabanas, and drawling drowsy abuse of some "fellow" who had appointed to meet them there, and who was behind his time.

As Mrs. Harding approached this door, she slackened her footsteps all at once, and walked slowly by, with her veil thrown back and her face turned towards the gas-lighted window. She was scarcely half-a-dozen yards from the shop, when Gervoise Catheron muttered some hurried excuse to his companion, and darted after her.

"Good Ged!" murmured the ensign, lifting his pale eyebrows and yawning dismally, "I really think every body has gone mad this afternoon." He prepared himself a fresh cigar, in a dreadfully boa-constrictor-like manner, and then disappeared in the passage over whose threshold shone the mystic word "Billiards."

Gervoise Catheron overtook the widow just as

she turned into a dingy little lane of gloomy houses, leading towards the swampy shores of the Merdrid.

"Beauty!" he exclaimed, in a tone that was very subdued, and yet very energetic, "what on earth is the meaning of your turning up in this unexpected manner in High Street, Castleford? I should as soon have thought of meeting the pontiff Pio Nono parading past Hodgson's shop as you. I thought it was an understood thing that you did *not* come to England, Beauty?"

Mrs. Harding had lowered her veil by this time. She turned upon the sub-lieutenant with a frown whose darkness he did not see.

"Why do you call me by that absurd name?" she asked angrily. "Do you want to remind me that I was a child once, and had a foolish mother and father, whose affection proved itself by giving their children sentimental pet-names, and letting them grow up as they pleased, or as they could? for it would have been difficult to grow into any thing good in *our* house. Call me Blanche. I have used my second name lately, for I hate every other by which I was ever called."

Gervoise Catheron did not answer for some moments; and then it seemed as if he had not heard, or at any rate had not heeded, Mrs. Harding's last words.

"Beauty," he said, after a pause, "you have grown as hard as your sister."

"Was I ever different from her?"

"Yes," he answered sadly, "I think you were, once."

There was another pause, and then the sub-lieutenant said, in an altered tone, "But, for goodness-sake, Beau—well, Blanche, if you like,—God knows there's not so much childishness about us now, that we must needs call ourselves by childish names!—how is it that you drop out of the skies into High Street, Castleford? I thought you had promised to live out of England."

"What does that matter to you?"

"Very little, certainly. Only when you promise a fellow to do such and such a thing, and a fellow, on that consideration, acts very liberally,—and there's no denying that he has acted very liberally, Beau—oh, hang it all! Blanche, if you

like it better,—though I can't say that *I* have benefited much by his liberality,—I think the least you can do is to keep your promise. However, as you remark, or as you were about to remark, I can see, by that jerk of your bonnet, that's no affair of mine. I was sorry to hear of your sister's death, Blanche; though I can't say she was ever particularly good to me—ah, I see by that other jerk of your bonnet, you think that's unfeeling; but a fellow's mind is likely to be degraded when the best thing a fellow's friends can do for him is to put him into a service in which a man calls himself a soldier, but takes his orders from the Admiralty, and lives amongst sailors without claiming fellowship with them. You've left off your mourning, I perceive. I haven't. I gave a shilling for a hatband the day I heard of her death; and I've worn it ever since! and deuced shabby both the band and the hat are by this time."

"Are you in difficulties, Gervoise?" asked the widow, when they had walked to the end of the lane, and had turned to go back again.

"Of course I am in difficulties. Was I ever out of them?" cried the sub-lieutenant with easy frankness; "difficulty is my normal state, and has been ever since I had threepence a week for pocket-money at a preparatory school, and spent sixpence. I did my first bill—on the cover of my copybook—before my eleventh birthday, and have been doing bills, and occasionally the bill-discounters, ever since. And I really think, Beauty, —now don't jerk your bonnet, though I acknowledge that it does sound rather as if you were a King-Charles spaniel with apoplectic eyeballs and a crumpled nose,—I really think, Blanche, that after a separation of ten years—and, upon my honour, you don't look as if it had been more than five—the least you could do would be to offer me a modest tener, or, putting it more clearly, a ten-pound note."

"Gervoise!" exclaimed the widow reproachfully, "who would believe that you belong to one of the oldest families in Buckinghamshire?"

"Ah, who indeed? And in the marines! But I really shall be very grateful for that tener.

Suppose you give me your purse offhand, as they do on the stage," said Mr. Catheron, as the widow produced her portemonnaie.

But Mrs. Harding was not a benefactress of the order so common in melodrama; she opened the portemonnaie, and deliberately counted four sovereigns, which she handed to the lieutenant.

"That's all I can do for you to-night, Gervoise," she said; "and now I must wish you good night, and hurry back to a friend whom I left waiting for me in the High Street."

She was walking very fast as she spoke.

"But tell me where you are staying."

"I can't stop to do that now. Give me your address, and I will write to you. But be quick; I must get back to my friend."

"But who *is* your friend?" asked Mr. Catheron, fumbling in his waistcoat-pocket, and producing a crumpled envelope.

The widow snatched it from him impatiently. They were at the corner of the lane by this time.

"Don't follow me a step farther; and don't

on any account recognise me if you meet me with any one. I'll write to you in a day or two."

She turned into the High Street, and hurried away before her companion could attempt to detain her. The lieutenant stood for a few minutes staring absently after her, and then strolled slowly towards the tobacconist's, with his hands in his pockets, and the sovereigns jingling as he walked. It was to be observed that in the whole course of this conversation the widow had not indulged in any of those little outbursts of emotion so common in her conversation. There were evidently occasions upon which the enthusiastic Mrs. Harding did *not* gush.

CHAPTER XI.

WHY DID SHE DO IT?

MR. PAUNCEFORT'S servant made his appearance at the Abbey early in the afternoon of the 24th, and joined a social tea-drinking party in the housekeeper's room, after arranging his master's things in the pretty blue bedchamber. But George Pauncefort himself strolled across the park in the early dusk, and was ushered into Sir Jasper's den just as that gentleman had composed himself for his before-dinner nap.

The Baronet roused himself with an exclamation of pleasure, and shook hands very heartily with his visitor.

"I am flattered by this fulfilment of your promise, my dear Pauncefort," he said; "as I began to think you were revenging yourself upon us for the dulness of our house, and had cut us

dead. You will be rewarded by finding some improvement in the state of affairs, in the shape of a handsome widow, who has come all the way from Homburg—no, her last location was a villa at Passy, by the way—to enliven us with her vivacity. Such inexhaustible animation!—the sort of woman one remembers in half-a-dozen comedies of the hoop-and-powder school. The woman who taps you playfully with her fan, and vows you're vastly agreeable. A charming creature to flirt with, if you know how to keep yourself on the safe side; but a creature who would have an offer of marriage and a princely settlement out of a weak-minded man before he knew where he was. However, after enjoying the society of the lions on the banks of the Niger, and stalking crocodiles on the rushy shores of the Nile, I should think you must be a match for a widow."

"I am not afraid of any peril from the lady's fascinations, however charming she may be," answered Mr. Pauncefort, with a grave smile. "But I have such a misanthropical aversion to the faces of strangers, that I am really inclined to throw

myself upon your mercy, Sir Jasper, and entreat your permission to defer my visit until after your fascinating guest has departed. I was so happy here in the autumn; happier than I can possibly be when the quiet spell that hangs about this heart is broken by the presence of a stranger."

He spoke almost sadly, and he looked round the dusky room with a pensive tenderness in his dark eyes.

"I was so very happy here," he repeated, in an undertone,—"so entirely happy."

Sir Jasper turned upon his tenant with an impatient gesture.

"*Histoire de bêtise!* my dear Mr. Pauncefort," he cried, "do you mean to tell me that you intend to run away from my house because I happen to be encumbered by a futile widow, picked up at Homburg? If there is such a thing in this world as friendship, I really think the sentiment which I entertain for you must be that thing. Don't fling me back upon the frivolous society of an over-dressed widow. Your companionship has done more towards exorcising the dismal phantoms of

the past than I thought was within the power of mortal man to do. Spend to-morrow with us; and if, when to-morrow night comes, you find you have been bored intolerably, turn your back upon us the following morning."

"You are very good, Sir Jasper. Your friendship flatters as much as it pleases me. I should like to stop. The very atmosphere of this room has almost a magical effect upon me, for in this room I beheld the first glimpse of a home after fifteen years of homelessness; it has been to me what the first dim blue line of an English shore must be to the wanderer who has spent half a life-time at the antipodes. Yes, I should so much like to stop. But, to be frank with you, I have not only a dislike to meeting strangers,—I have something more than that: I have something that amounts to an actual terror of meeting any one in the remotest degree associated with my past life. Fifteen years ago I lived in London, and knew a great many people; and one of my reasons for avoiding all society is my horror of meeting any of those old acquaintances."

Such a speech as this, from a man whose past was entirely unknown to his host, might have awakened vague fears in the breast of a suspicious person. But Sir Jasper was neither suspicious nor inquisitive; he had none of those low vices which inflict infinite trouble upon their victims: his vices and his virtues were alike of a negative order. Dr. Johnson declared the belief in a future existence to be the only thing which hinders a man from cutting his neighbour's throat, for the sake of filling his own pocket. But there are many reasons which would have hindered Sir Jasper Denison from improving his own fortunes by the assassination of his fellow-men, over and above acid Beauclerk's sensible argument, that the man who has no faith in the immortality of the soul may have a very implicit belief in the existence of the hangman. Murder, however neatly it may be executed, is a crime attended with unutterable inconvenience. A combination of circumstances might have arisen under which it would have been possible for Sir Jasper to look on and see a murder committed; but under

no possible phase of events could the Baronet have done the deed. He had been a disciple of Voltaire ever since his boyhood; he had looked up at the stars, and admired them with the sensuous admiration of a Sardanapalus, and had rarely lost an opportunity of insulting their mighty Creator by some covert sneer; but he had never in all his life done any thing particularly wicked, chiefly because he knew very well that every kind of sin is so apt to entail trouble and vexation upon the sinner.

"I can understand your desire to turn your back upon the past," he said; "but, unless you know this Mrs. Harding, I don't see how her presence here can affect you."

"Harding?" repeated George Pauncefort; "no. It's a common name enough; but I don't think I ever knew any one of the name of Harding."

"Very well, then; of course in that case you will stop?"

"Do you really wish me to do so?"

"With all my heart."

"And I too, Mr. Pauncefort," said a low gentle voice; and, looking up with a start, Sir Jasper's tenant saw Marcia Denison standing on the threshold of the door. He hurried across the room to meet her as she advanced towards him. She gave him her hand, and, looking at her in the firelight, he thought that her pale beauty was something akin to the white loveliness of the lilies he had seen in that wondrous region between the Tigris and the Euphrates, which travellers fondly believe in as the original Eden.

"I hope you are not going to run away from us, Mr. Pauncefort," said Marcia. "I am sure you would not wish to do so if you knew how much papa and I have looked forward to your promised visit."

"Ah," thought Sir Jasper's tenant, "she would scarcely say that if she did not think me old enough to be her grandfather."

"You will find Mrs. Harding a very agreeable person," continued Miss Denison; "and if you are fond of music, as I have no doubt you are, we shall be able to entertain you—"

"Oh," said Mr. Pauncefort, "Mrs. Harding is musical, then?"

"Yes; she is an accomplished musician, and has a very fine voice. Why, you look almost as if that were an objection! Did Diogenes object to music?"

"Perhaps Diogenes had no unpleasant associations connected with it, Miss Denison. For myself, I am very fond of music; but there is a certain kind of pianoforte music whose sound brings back to me the dreariest part of my life. I once knew a lady who wore a blue dress on the night her husband was brought home to her killed by a fall from his horse. She could never endure the sight of that colour afterwards, though she married again, and was the happy mother of beautiful children. However, I am not quite so sensitive as that lady, and I shall be very glad to hear as much music as ever you and your guest will give me."

"Will you come and be introduced to her? I have just left her and I must return immediately. We have both of us been busy in our

rooms all day, and I really have scarcely seen her since breakfast."

"I shall be very happy to come with you."

"And you will take a nap, I suppose, papa, before you dress?"

"Dress for dinner!" cried Sir Jasper. "How inscrutable are the formulas of civilisation! My velvet dressing-gown is really a handsome and not altogether unpicturesque garment, with easy flowing lines, and an agreeable variety of light and shadow; while my swallow-tailed coat, on the other hand, is shabby, old-fashioned, and ungraceful: and yet, if I were to dine in my dressing-gown, the widow would consider herself an injured woman. *Au revoir*, my dear Pauncefort! Go and be fascinated, while I take my restorative nap, and refit my exhausted intellect for an argumentative evening."

The lamps had not yet been carried into the amber drawing-room when Marcia and Mr. Pauncefort entered the apartment. No one but a barbarian is ever in any hurry to put an end to

a winter twilight and the flickering glow of a fire in a brightly-furnished room. Mrs. Harding was standing in one of the windows, with her elbow resting on the elaborate scroll-work of a high-backed chair, and her face towards the dusky landscape.

She turned her head as Marcia and her companion entered, but still stood in the deep embrasure of the window, half-hidden by the shadow of voluminous curtains.

Sir Jasper's tenant saw only the outline of a very perfect figure, and the warm reddish hue of a violet-silk dress, touched here and there by the firelight.

"Blanche," said Marcia, "I have brought you Mr. Pauncefort, the owner of that romantic little Hermitage which you so much admired yesterday, as we drove through the wood."

"Then I am sure I shall be delighted to see him!" cried the widow; "for no one but a man with the eye of a painter and the soul of a poet would be likely to select such a sweet spot. I must claim a kindred spirit, and shake hands with

your friend on the strength of our sympathy, Marcia."

That had been a dark brooding face which had looked out at the blackening winter sky; but Blanche Harding spoke in her sprightliest manner, as she came smiling out of the shadows, and advanced with outstretched hand towards Miss Denison's companion. There was a faint flavour of patronage in the sweetness of her tone. The widow was a woman of the world, and had concluded that a man who would consent to bury himself in the sombre recesses of Scarsdale Wood must have not only the soul of a poet and the eye of a painter, but the limited income of a man who finds himself unable to live any where else.

She came smiling out of the darkness, her silken draperies trailing after her, deeply purple in the shadow, brightly red in the light, like the convolutions of some beautiful serpent; but as she stood a little way from Sir Jasper's tenant, with her hand outstretched, waiting for him to take it, and her handsome head uplifted with a kind of regal graciousness, the capricious firelight

—which played all manner of practical jokes with the pictures on the walls, making Etty's drawing absurd, and Turner's colouring ridiculous—leapt into sudden brightness, and flickered on George Pauncefort's face.

Blanche Harding's extended hand dropped heavily upon a little table, a tiny gilded table, loaded with fragile toys, which fell crashing down beneath the weight of that falling hand. Sir Jasper's tenant stood unmoved as a statue, looking the widow full in the face. Marcia Denison glanced amazedly from one to the other. Was this a recognition—a surprise—or what?

"There never was any thing so preposterous as the delusions created by the light of a wood-fire," cried Mrs. Harding, turning to Marcia. "Mr. Pauncefort's face just this moment looked like the face of a man who died ten years ago; and yet I daresay, when the lamps are brought in, I shall find no resemblance between your papa's friend and the person of whom he so terribly reminded me."

The widow shuddered—a coquettish little

shudder, which brought her sloping shoulders into play—and then breathed a faint languishing sigh, expressive of intense relief.

"Oh, here are the lamps; and I see that I was quite right—Mr. Pauncefort is not an atom like the poor dead person. Oh, my dear Marcia, I really fear I have broken some of your pretty Dresden—that darling little cup with the cover—. *is* the cover all right?—yes, it really has escaped, love! I am so glad, it's such a sweet colour—Augustus Rex, I know, and not the trumpery crossed-dagger-marked modern stuff that one can buy wholesale any where. I am such a silly, sensitive creature," exclaimed the widow, who was kneeling on the ground, examining one of the fallen cups and saucers. "And there are memories which—no, I will *not* be sentimental; and I will go and dress for dinner."

She rose from her knees, placed the little cup and saucer gently amongst its kindred cups and saucers, made a graceful little curtsey, half to Miss Denison, half to Mr. Pauncefort, and left the room with a noiseless gliding step, and the

violet silken drapery winding after her, always more or less serpentine in its trailing splendour.

"Are you very intimate with Mrs. Harding?" George Pauncefort asked presently, as Marcia seated herself by a table, on which the servant had placed a shaded reading-lamp.

"Oh no; I can scarcely say I am intimate with her. I never saw her until last year, at Homburg. Papa likes her very much."

"And do *you* like her, Miss Denison?"

"I think her very clever—and very agreeable."

"Exactly. And that reply means that you do *not* like her?"

"Really, Mr. Pauncefort, I don't think you have any right to ask me such a question, or to jump at any conclusion upon such a point! I am not a person to make sudden friendships, and I have known Mrs. Harding a very short time; but she is my guest, and I should think that fact in itself should preclude the possibility of any question as to my liking for her."

"Forgive me, if I have violated the sanctity of the bread and salt."

There was a long pause, during which Mr. Pauncefort walked up and down the room, while Marcia strung some beads upon a piece of silk; and then he made some commonplace remark, from which they drifted into conversation: but there was a tone of restraint in their conversation; it was not quite the old easy talk with which they had beguiled so many hours in the autumn that was past.

Marcia wondered why this was; and found herself wondering whether Mrs. Harding's explanation of her sudden emotion was quite a truthful one; or whether these two people might not have known and quarrelled with each other in some remote period of their existences, and parted in anger years ago, to meet accidentally to-night, with conventional smiles on their faces, and a stranger looking on at the meeting.

Sir Jasper appeared presently, looking unutterably patrician, in very shabby evening-dress; and shortly afterwards Mrs. Harding came rustling into the room in the green moiré-antique and the *cabochon* emeralds.

Her shoulders were shrouded by the point-lace pelerine; but her plump arms were bare from the elbows downwards, and midway between the elbow and the wrist of the left arm she wore a broad band of black velvet, clasped so tightly as almost to cut the soft white flesh.

Sir Jasper's tenant only looked at her once as she stood before him in the full light of the lamps, and then his glance went straight to the velvet bracelet on her left arm.

It was not a pleasant evening. The dinner and the wines were perfection; but there is a heaviness of spirit which all the vintages of the *Côte-d'Or* are powerless to dispel. To-night a leaden dulness oppressed somebody in that small circle, and communicated itself by some subtle magnetism to every body else. Mrs. Harding played *écarté* with the Baronet, and twice forgot to mark the king. She sang with Marcia; but she made a piteous fiasco of the time in the quick movement of a duet from *Norma*. There was something wrong. Sir Jasper yawned in his tenant's face, and then apologised profusely for his own dulness.

"We are four very intellectual people, but we are not proof against the influence of the festive season," said the Baronet. "The twenty-fourth of December is too much for us. *The* people, the representative merry-makers, are hard at it by this time,—slapping one another upon the back, and boisterously patching-up old quarrels and forgetting old grievances, and putting themselves into unpleasant perspirations with hot spiced drinks, and letting bygones be bygones in the most vulgar and ungrammatical manner. Peace on earth and goodwill to men, says the hymn which the charity-children will sing—lamentably flat, by the by—to-morrow; well, it's a pretty idea, and why should we quarrel with it? Peace upon earth, and goodwill amongst men, say I. Marcia, we seem all of us a cup too low to-night. Ring the bell, my dear, and order Old Oliver's tankard to be filled with mulled claret,—the Lafitte with the black seal. It's close upon twelve o'clock; and, by all that is jovial, we'll keep Christmas like the people in the illustrated newspapers, and our toast shall be, Peace and goodwill."

"Dear Sir Jasper, what a charming idea! and how delighted I should be to help you in carrying it out!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding, rising from before the piano with an air of fatigue; "but I have such a terrible headache that I must really say good-night immediately, or I shall be quite unable to go to church to-morrow morning."

For the second time that night, and only the second time, Mr. Pauncefort looked straight at the widow. His bearded lip stirred a little, as if he would have spoken; but he turned suddenly away, and looked down at the fire, into whose hollow depth he had been staring absently for some time before.

Somehow or other the black-sealed claret was not uncorked that evening; and Sir Jasper lost the opportunity of patronising Christianity.

While the great stable-clock was striking twelve, with a ponderous chime that mingled with the voices of some village lads singing a Christmas-carol on the Abbey-terrace, Blanche Harding stood before the fire in her room, loosely wrapped

in a dressing-gown, one sleeve of which was rolled up to her shoulder, and securely pinned there. It was the left arm which was thus bared—a plump white arm, without spot or blemish. The widow's face bore a strange expression, almost an expression of pain; and yet she was only staring at the fire, into the very heart of which she had thrust the point of the poker.

Presently, shuddering from head to foot, she knelt upon the hearth-rug, and drew the poker from the burning coals. Her face was horribly distorted as she grasped the centre of this poker, and laid the red-hot point of it across her arm, midway between the wrist and the elbow, exactly where she had clasped the velvet bracelet when she dressed for dinner that evening.

CHAPTER XII.

DRIVEN AWAY.

Sir Jasper's tenant did not appear in the breakfast-room on Christmas morning. His man brought a message of apology to the Baronet—a vague message, alleging no particular reason for his master's absence; but the languid chieftain of Scarsdale allowed perfect liberty to his guests, and was not given to be curious as to their motives for doing this or that.

The sparkling widow was not quite so brilliant as usual this morning. A delicate pallor, just a little chalky in a strong east light, had superseded the rich bloom which was wont to glow upon her plump cheeks. The brightness of her eyes was a trifle feverish, and the red lips had a dry look, and quivered nervously every now and then.

Sir Jasper, looking at her as he might have looked at one of his pictures whose colour showed symptoms of decay, could not refrain from a languid speculation regarding his guest's altered looks.

"Those abominable carol-singers kept you awake half the night, I daresay," he murmured compassionately. "Imagine the utter idiocy of half-a-dozen clodhoppers, who howl, 'God rest you, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,' when their own hideous minstrelsy is horrible enough to break the rest of the seven sleepers, and dismay the uncultivated ears of an Ojibbeway Indian. You look as if you had been haunted all night by the memory of their howling."

Mrs. Harding smiled a very wan smile.

"You are quite right, Sir Jasper," she said, "as to my sleeplessness, but wrong as regards the cause of it. I would have forgiven the carol-singers; indeed I love to hear those dear old verses sung under the windows of such a house as this; I am carried back to the days of the cavaliers, by the sound of that quaint invocation and

almost expect to awake in one of Mr. Horsley's interiors. No, I would have forgiven the villagers on the terrace for being a little undecided as to what key they should sing in, and should have gone to sleep to dream about some phantom lady in a brocaded sacque, I daresay, if it had not been for a very severe attack of my old enemy *tic*, which kept me tossing about in agony all the night; and I really feel so miserably languid and drowsy this morning, that I must excuse myself from attending your darling little village church, whose steeple I saw from my window peeping out of a break in the leafless woodland, just like some delicious little 'bit' by Mr. Creswick. So, with your permission, dear Marcia, I shall read the Christmas service in my own room, or in one of your easy-chairs by the drawing-room fire."

The Baronet and his daughter were politely concerned about their guest's neuralgic affection.

"I hope the woman is not going to inflict her illnesses upon us," thought Sir Jasper, after murmuring something that was indistinctly compassionate and befitting the occasion; "a lively

widow is one thing, but a neuralgic widow is another. There's a want of tone about her left cheek this morning, and the right eyebrow is decidedly out of drawing. Her toilet has been by no means conscientious, and I hold myself aggrieved by her careless manipulation. If she wants to make as long a visit as her trunks and bandboxes predicate, she must suppress her neuralgic symptoms, and improve her flesh-tints. I haven't any thing on my walls so crude or cold as my visitor's face this morning."

"If you were to take a little chlorodyne," murmured Marcia.

"With a warm glaze over the left cheek," muttered Sir Jasper, absently.

"I will try any thing you recommend me, dearest Marcia," answered the widow; "for I really suffered very terribly last night. However, I feel a little better this morning; and I daresay after a few hours' complete repose, I shall be quite myself, and thoroughly able to enjoy a social evening."

Marcia retired to dress for church, and Mrs.

Harding left Sir Jasper to his papers by the fire in the breakfast-room. She went to her own room; but instead of lying down, as she had talked of doing, she paced the spacious chamber slowly from end to end, stopping now and then to look at her face in the glass.

It was an anxious brooding face that looked back at her; very haggard in spite of the artificial aid which had been brought to bear to make it beautiful; and the widow looked at it angrily, with a scowl that darkened it, and made it even more haggard.

"What a wretch I look!" she muttered, "and when so much depends on my looking well. What have I in the world but my beauty; and if that fades, what hope is there that I shall ever regain a footing in the only world that is worth living in? Oh, how I hate that other world, that hot-bed of lies and baseness, in which all the women are vulgar parodies of myself, in which all the men are selfish and false and cruel and cowardly! It all seemed so bright once, and I thought it something to be a queen in it; but

now I know it, and I know what its highest prizes are worth."

There was a gentle little tap at the door while the widow stood brooding thus before the glass; and when she opened it, pretty Dorothy stood before her, radiant in the velvet bonnet and blue ribbons, and holding a tiny bottle in her hand.

"Please, ma'am, Miss Marcia told me to bring you this. The chlorid-of-lime, ma'am, she said. I mean the chori—oh, dear, I am so stupid!—and would you be so kind as to try it, Miss Marcia said."

Dorothy was quite breathless with hurry, for she was speeding off to the lodge, where Mr. Tursgood the bailiff was to pick her up in the chaise-cart which conveyed that gentleman and his young family to the little Roman-Catholic chapel at Castleford. As Dorothy handed the chlorodyne to Sir Jasper's guest, something in the dark eyes of the widow moved her with a strange tremor. Why it was so, she was far too hurried to consider just now. But the image of one person which had haunted her very much of

late, and had floated hazily in her mind all that morning, assumed in that one moment a more vivid life, and shone before her distinct and palpable as reality.

"If this stuff can do any thing for my shattered nerves, I shall thank the man who invented it," muttered the widow, as she poured a few drops from Marcia's bottle.

She went to one of the windows presently, and stood there until she saw Miss Denison walk briskly along one of the winding paths leading towards the church. Then she went back to the glass, and looked at herself again, scrutinising the reflected face with a long and thoughtful gaze. After that leisurely scrutiny, Mrs. Harding took a handsomely-bound church-service from amongst the numberless elegant possessions she had scattered about her apartment, and descended the grand staircase. She met no one on her way to the hall, though she lingered here and there upon the staircase to look out of a window, or to examine a picture, and she walked down the long corridor leading to the drawing-room with

a slow languid step. The pretty amber-curtained room was quite empty when she entered it; but a superb fire, a real Christmas fire, burned in the low grate, and reflected itself in the many-coloured gothic tiles and the fantastic spikiness of the steel fender.

Mrs. Harding sank into a low chair, a perfect nest of downy puffiness and amber-satin damask; a chair in which to lounge away a lifetime, reading dreamy idyls in the intervals of a long chain of naps; a chair whose enervating influence stifled the voice of ambition, and deadened the reproving murmurs of conscience; a chair which might have transformed a Napoleon into an idle dreamer, and reduced a John Howard into a selfish Sybarite. Perhaps there never was a richer little study of colour, a more exquisite cabinet-picture, than the splendid widow seated in this chair, and loosely robed in a dressing-gown of quilted purple silk, from whose voluminous folds peeped two slim feet, with arched insteps, that might have belonged to one of Alfred de Musset's Andalusian countesses; feet that were set off by gray-silk

stockings and high-heeled slippers of glimmering bronze, adorned with coquettishly careless scarlet bows, from one of which a painter might have built up the image of a lovely débardeuse tripping away from a carnival ball; just as easily as a naturalist constructs his antediluvian mammoth out of a stray bone dug by hazard from the bowels of the earth. But beautiful as the accessories of the picture might be, there was something wanting to its completeness, and that was the very soul of the subject. The attitude was perfect, the background faultless; but the expression of repose was not there. Mrs. Harding's head lay back upon the puffy amber cushion, in the abandonment of feminine laziness; but Mrs. Harding's eyes wandered restlessly from the door to the fire, and from the fire back to the door. It was only when there was the sound of a footstep in the corridor, that the sweeping lashes drooped drowsily over the dark splendour of the widow's eyes, and the red lips parted like the lips of a sleeping child.

Nothing could be better in the way of his-

trionic art than the little movement of bewilderment and surprise with which Mrs. Harding started from that mock sleep on the entrance of the person whose footstep she had just heard in the corridor. The person was George Pauncefort. He shut the door behind him, bent his head to the widow with a stately gravity of gesture, and walked straight to the angle of the fireplace opposite that by which she was sitting. His manner could not have been more ceremonious had he been approaching a stranger, or, I should rather say, his manner could not have been *so* ceremonious towards a stranger. There is a certain ceremony which a gentleman only assumes when he encounters an enemy. A French nobleman of the *vieille roche*, meeting his antagonist some dewy summer morning in the wood beyond the *barrière de l'Etoile*, might carry himself as Sir Jasper's tenant did to-day.

"Good morning, Mrs. Harding," he said, always preserving the same frigid manner; "I believe it is by that name you desire to be known."

"If you please. It is a very unpretending name."

The widow retained her attitude of complete repose, and there was an exquisitely-simulated languor in the expression of her countenance, which might have deceived any one who had not seen her five minutes before.

"I thought it best that I should see you before leaving this house; and I am glad to find this opportunity of speaking to you," said Mr. Paumefort, very gravely.

"You are going to leave the Abbey, then?"

"You cannot imagine that I should remain. I wish to leave without *esclandre*, if possible. I need scarcely say how entirely surprised I was by the meeting of last night."

"Unpleasantly surprised, I suppose?" asked the widow.

There was a tightness about her handsome lips, a lurid glitter in her handsome eyes during this interview with Sir Jasper's tenant, that imparted rather a diabolical character to her dark beauty. There was a flimsy little sketch of a

Judith, painted by Etty, in a corner of the drawing-room; and the dark intensity of the face in the picture was less terrible than the expression that revealed itself under Blanche Harding's pearl-powder.

"Very unpleasantly," answered George Pauncefort. "The threshold of this house is the first I have crossed for fifteen years in the character of friend and guest. I had weighed well the probabilities for and against my meeting any one who knows me or my miserable story; and under the peculiar circumstances of this household I believed myself safe. Of all creatures that ever lived upon this earth, you are the person whom I could least have expected to meet under this roof."

"Indeed! And why?"

No words can do justice to the amount of quiet aggravation which Mrs. Harding contrived to infuse into the enunciation of these four commonplace syllables. Only a woman, and a woman who had been accustomed to the feminine luxury of having some creature of the genus husband to

torment could have obtained such a mastery over the elocution of malice.

"For many reasons. First, because you were bound by a promise never to return to this country."

"I have kept that promise faithfully for fifteen years. When I heard of you, it was always as a traveller; now in the interior of South America—now in the wilds of Africa. My sister's death left me very lonely."

"Your sister's death!" cried Sir Jasper's tenant with something that was almost a groan. "God help you, Caroline! you might have been a different woman if that sister had died in her cradle."

Mrs. Harding lifted her head suddenly from its attitude of assumed languor, and looked at George Paunceforth with a fiercer light in her eyes than had shone in them yet.

"My sister had nothing to do with my sins," she said. "I can bear the weight of them myself."

"But for your sister's influence I do believe

you might never have sinned. I think yours and your brother's nature were of that plastic kind, too weak to walk unaided in the path of virtue, not strong enough to stand alone in vice. You went the way that you were led, and there were two people who plotted together to lead you to perdition. Your sister, Leonora Fane, was one of them."

"You had better leave my sister's name out of the question. I have no wish to hear it."

"God knows how little wish I have to utter it. The past is past. I have wasted fifteen years in trying to bury the corpse of my perished youth, and I have not yet found the grave deep enough to hold the loathsome thing. Its ghost rises and follows me wherever I go. And now, Mrs. Harding, I have some right to know when you mean to leave this house."

"Why should I leave it?"

"Simply because you should never have entered it. You have no right to sleep under the same roof with Marcia Denison; you have no right to sit at the same table. O God of heaven!"

cried the tenant of the Hermitage with a sudden burst of passion which was all the more terrible for the frigidity of his previous manner, "I saw you kiss her last night; and my mind went back to a summer's evening fifteen years ago when I watched you kiss your child as you gave him into his nurse's arms. I do not think you can have forgotten that evening, Caroline. I prayed once that the memory of it might haunt you on your deathbed."

The widow watched Sir Jasper's tenant with keenly scrutinising eyes as he spoke, and there was something like a scintillation of triumph in those big black orbs.

"You seem very anxious that no tainted thing should approach Miss Denison's purity," she said, with a sneer; "and yet I do not see how you come to be so deeply interested in the young lady's welfare."

"I am interested in the cause of truth against falsehood," sternly answered George Pauncefort. "Tell these people who and what you are. Let them know your antecedents; throw yourself

upon their mercy; and *then* if they please to receive you, I will stand aloof and say nothing. If in all this world you can find a creature generous enough to take you by the hand, knowing what you are, Heaven forbid that I should stand between you and that outstretched hand! But I will not help you in a lie; I will not look placidly on while you creep into a gentleman's hospitable household with a mask upon your face."

"In that case you had better tell Sir Jasper Denison my story. Of course he will repeat the substance of your revelation to his daughter, and I shall receive a polite notice to quit. Ah, Mr. Pauncefort, I don't think you will care to tell Miss Marcia Denison who and what I am."

"Why should I not?"

"I cannot give you a reason. Do you remember how Maître Jacques replies to Harpagon? *Je le crois parceque je le crois.* I can only offer you the same kind of answer—you will not because you will not."

The widow was beginning to recover a little of

her habitual liveliness. She took Marcia's paper-knife from a table by her side, and began to cut open an illustrated newspaper—a Christmas number with the bright Christmas pictures, which it pleased the Voltairean Baronet to ridicule. Looking at her as she sat opposite him, George Pauncefort's mind travelled back to the autumn evening upon which he had first entered that house; the evening on which he had watched Marcia Denison sitting in the dim glow of the fire, with that very paper-knife in her hand.

"It is only three months since that night," mused Sir Jasper's tenant, "and yet the larger half of my lifetime seems the period in which I have known her."

He was silent for some few minutes, and then he said gravely:

"I had a right to expect that you would keep your promise. I have wished you to be rich, in order that you might be at least beyond the reach of any sordid temptation. I do not threaten you now with a reduction or withdrawal of your income. But I tell you frankly that I will not

suffer you to remain a visitor in this house, and the companion of Miss Denison."

"Then you will tell them—every thing?"

A faint flush dyed Mr. Pauncefort's face and passed away before he answered this question.

"I shall take my own time to think of that," he said; "I only tell you that unless you leave this house with your own free will, and very speedily, I will do all I can to render your departure inevitable."

"When the inevitable moment arrives, I will go. In the mean time I am an invited guest; and I mean to remain."

"Caroline," exclaimed Sir Jasper's tenant, looking at the widow with an expression which was half stern, half pitiful, "I did not think it was in you to become so bold in wickedness."

"Fifteen years is a long time," answered Mrs. Harding. "You shut a woman out of the world in which good people live, and then you wonder at her if she becomes worse than she was at the hour of her exclusion."

"Fifteen years might have done much towards

the redemption of the past, if you had spent them as you might have done. But I tell you again, Caroline, it was your misfortune to be guided by the worst counsellor who ever whispered evil suggestions into a woman's ear. She is dead, and I have tried to think less bitterly of her, or not to think of her at all. May a merciful God have that compassion for her sins which I cannot feel! I have heard of you and Mrs. Fane during my dreary exile, and I have heard something of the kind of life you led, and the people whom you chose for your associates. But I will say no more. I have no wish to interfere with your life, except in the defence of friends whom I respect. I claim the right to call the people who inhabit this house my friends; and all that a gentleman may do in the service of his friends, I will do for them."

A shadow came between George Pauncefort and the light, as he said this, and looking up he saw Marcia Denison passing the window opposite to him. He bent his head gravely to Mrs. Harding, exactly as he had done before, and left the room.

He walked very rapidly along the corridor, but at the end of it he met Marcia Denison, bright and girlish-looking in her simple winter-bonnet, and with the frosty freshness of the out-of-door atmosphere hanging about her garments. Sir Jasper's tenant passed her with a smile and a bow, and went straight to his own apartment, where he spent some time in the concoction of a letter addressed to his host.

When he had folded and sealed the letter, he rang for his servant.

"I leave the Abbey this morning, Milward," he said; "I find myself quite unequal to the excitement of society. You will pack my portmanteau and follow me. But before you do so, you will give this letter to Sir Jasper Denison."

"Yes, sir."

The well-bred servant expressed no astonishment whatever at this sudden change in his master's plans. He had served the man who called himself George Pauncefort for some six or seven years, and he had almost parted with the faculty of astonishment in that long experience

of a moody traveller's caprices. This abrupt departure from Scarsdale Abbey was only one evidence the more of that irritable nature which vainly sought for relief in change and action.

The valet assisted Mr. Pauncefort to put on his greatcoat, followed him to the hall, and opened the door for him, and then went quietly back to the blue bedroom to pack the things which he had arranged in lavender-perfumed drawers the day before. And thus, on the day which in happy households is so bright a festival, Sir Jasper's tenant left Scarsdale Abbey to return to a cold hearth and an empty shelter, and to make his Christmas dinner off an ill-cooked mutton-chop eaten beside a smouldering fire of sputtering green logs.

"Driven out by her!" thought the hermit as he filled his meerschaum; "I think to-day's work is the moral of my own life. Driven away by her!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AWKWARD FOR SIR JASPER.

WHILE George Pauncefort was walking homeward beneath the frosty December sky, Sir Jasper Denison sat in his favourite chair under the shadow of the grim bronze sea-god, and slept the Sybarite's peaceful slumber, soothed by the monotonous ticking of the clock and the soughing of the wintry wind among the oaks, faintly heard through double windows of plate-glass.

The Baronet stirred himself slightly in his chair with a peevish movement when a servant entered the room and laid a letter on the table; but he did not open his eyes until the same man brought a reading-lamp and placed it in the centre of the chaos of papers and periodicals within reach of Sir Jasper's hand.

"What letter is that on the table yonder?

Be so good as to give it to me, Jarvis; though I've no doubt it's something unpleasant," muttered the Baronet; "letters almost always are unpleasant. What a portentous seal! Why, in the name of all that is absurd, do people try to make their letters look like death-warrants? Who brought this?" asked Sir Jasper, languidly stretching out his hand to receive the missive.

"It was not brought, sir: Mr. Pauncefort's servant gave it to me when he left the Abbey."

"When he left the Abbey! What do you mean?"

"The letter will explain, sir, I believe, from what Mr. Pauncefort's man said. He left at three o'clock, sir, and Milward went a little before four."

"Oh, very well," murmured Sir Jasper with a dreary yawn, as the man left the room. "Mr. Pauncefort was free to go when he pleased: Diogenes has found our society unendurable, and gone back to his tub. The misfortune is that this Diogenes is really a very pleasant fellow, and I shall miss him. However, there is

the lively widow. I wash my hands of Diogenes, and fall back upon the widow. Let us see what the fellow has to say for himself."

He tore open the envelope and read the following epistle:

"My dear Sir Jasper,—It seems peculiarly ungracious to turn my back upon your hospitality on such a day as this, when the sanctity which always pervades a peaceful home is multiplied a hundredfold by the memories which this day brings along with it. I leave your house very reluctantly, and I leave it only because there is a visitor beneath your roof whose presence renders it impossible that I should remain.

"When you mentioned Mrs. Harding's name before my introduction to her, I was not aware that I had ever met her in my life; but when I saw her, I recognised in her a woman whose career was very intimately known to me many years ago—a woman who is no fitting companion for your daughter, Miss Denison, since she is a wife who ran away from her husband, a mother who abandoned her child.

"It is on Miss Denison's account that I write this letter. Did you stand alone in the world, I might hold my peace, and suffer this woman to await the hour in which you would yourself discover the secret of her antecedents; but you would have the right to call me to a strict account of my conduct, were I to allow Mrs. Harding to remain under the roof that shelters your daughter. I do not stab your guest in the dark. You are at liberty to show this letter to Mrs. Harding, and to call upon her either to admit or disprove my accusations. If she should wish to see me in your presence, I shall be close at hand to support what I have said; but I have no more to say, and shall refuse to give any closer particulars of the broad facts which I have stated. I may add also, that I have no proofs to offer in confirmation of my charges against this lady. I can only ask you to believe in me as a gentleman; and I think you know me well enough to believe that I should not write this letter if I did not consider myself compelled to do so.

"I leave your house, my dear Sir Jasper, with deep regret. The circumstances of my life have shut me out of a home of my own; and the only hearth at which I have accepted a place has been darkened by the shadow of a woman about whom I cannot teach myself to think charitably, even on this day. I thank you most heartily for the friendship you have so generously given to a stranger; and I trust that my abrupt departure will in no way deprive me of your confidence and regard.

"I shall ask permission to complete my broken visit on some future occasion; and I shall be obliged if you will give whatever explanation of my conduct you may think best to Miss Denison.

"I remain, my dear Sir Jasper,

"Always truly yours,

"GEORGE PAUNCEFORT."

"Humph!" muttered the Baronet; "this is pleasant. A lively widow billeted upon one, with bandboxes that predicate a six-weeks' visit at the least; and, lo and behold, an unexpected denunciation of her as an improper person. And on

the traditionary festive occasion too! What am I to do? Give her a polite quietus? There is no possibility of getting rid of her without *esclandre*. A runaway wife! Is it true, I wonder? Surely yes; my tenant is a gentleman, and would not be so base as to slander a woman. This comes of picking up agreeable widows at such a place as Homburg. However, I must temporise matters, and get rid of her quietly as soon as I can: the woman's antecedents are not infectious, and the woman is a lady, though very florid. Marcia is far too strong-minded to be influenced in the smallest degree by any companionship; so there need be no feverish hurry about the matter."

While Sir Jasper mused thus with Mr. Pauncefort's letter in his hand, the door was opened very softly, and a silken rustling betrayed the sex of the person who opened it. Then a head peeped into the room, and then the door was thrown quite open, and Mrs. Harding appeared, splendid in ruby velvet, with white shoulders glimmering under a black-lace shawl, and diamond stars in her hair.

"I peeped in to see if you were taking your afternoon nap," she said; "but I am so glad to find you awake. Oh, dear Sir Jasper, I have something so *very* serious, so extremely unpleasant to say to you."

"Indeed," thought the Baronet; "and I have something very unpleasant to say to you whenever I can bring my courage to the sticking-place;" but he only bowed, with a little unintelligible murmur expressive of every thing that was unmeaningly polite.

He looked at her even more critically than usual. He had never seen her beauty more brilliant than it was to-night. Her cheeks seemed to be flushed with a natural crimson, her eyes sparkled with the effect of excitement, and not the ghastly brightness induced by belladonna; and beyond this the Baronet looked at her with a new interest, inspired by the contents of his tenant's letter, just as he would have looked all the more eagerly at a handsome Frenchwoman in the Bois de Boulogne, had he been told that she was Marie Laffarge.

"Dear Sir Jasper," said the widow, sinking gracefully into the chair opposite to the Baronet, "I am going to ask you all sorts of abrupt questions — impertinent questions you may perhaps think; but I trust you will believe that I am justified in asking them."

The Baronet bowed, with another polite little murmur. "What, in mercy's name, is the woman going to say?" he thought.

He had not observed Mrs. Harding's eyes fixing themselves for a moment on the letter in his hand, or the tightening of the lips that accompanied the glance.

"How long have you known Mr. Pauncefort?"

Sir Jasper was not very often surprised; but this question, asked by the widow with a certain business-like earnestness of tone, startled him out of his languid equanimity.

"I have not known him very long. But why do you ask the question?"

"I will tell you presently, when you have answered another. Was Mr. Pauncefort presented to you by any of your friends?"

"No."

"I thought not!" exclaimed the widow.

"Mr. Pauncefort is my tenant, and he is a gentleman. His manners please me. I respect his intellect, and I like his society. Am I to wait till some Smith or Brown of my acquaintance comes to me and says, 'My dear Sir Jasper, my friend Pauncefort is dying to know you. Will you allow me to present him to you? Sir Jasper Denison, Mr. Pauncefort,—Mr. Pauncefort, Sir Jasper Denison; eminently adapted for each other, I'm shaw!' and so on. No, Mrs. Harding, I choose my friends for myself, and on my own responsibility. And I very rarely make a mistake."

The Baronet's eyes fixed themselves very earnestly upon the widow as he said this. Her face darkened just a little under the scrutiny, and her glance, very steady until now, wandered restlessly to the letter in Sir Jasper's hand.

"I am very sorry that you have chosen Mr. Pauncefort for your friend," Mrs. Harding said very gravely.

"Why so?"

"Because he is unworthy of your friendship, unfit to be the associate of your daughter."

"Indeed! how unworthy? why unfit?"

"Because those who know him know him to be a bad man. A gentleman does not exile himself from his fellow-men without a sufficient reason. I knew George Pauncefort before he left England; and I have been given to understand, by those who know the mysteries of such matters, that when he turned his back upon his country he left a tainted name behind him."

"But what, in Heaven's name, had he done?" cried the Baronet, sitting erect in his chair, in the extremity of his bewilderment.

"How can I tell you? A woman never hears the real particulars of these stories. My husband was a man of the world. *He* knew the truth, I have no doubt; but I heard only hints and insinuations. I can tell you no more. I daresay the story was a common story enough; but it had the effect of driving the chief actor in it out of England; and even now, when he has returned

to this country, he seems to have returned only to seek a safer hiding-place."

Sir Jasper drew a long breath, and stared hopelessly, first at the lady opposite to him, and then at the letter in his hand. Here were separate denunciations, almost equally vague in their character, brought against each other by two people who were both unable or unwilling to substantiate their accusations by any means whatever. Which of the two was to be believed? that was the question.

"Egad! I'm afraid Pauncefort must be the sinner," thought Sir Jasper, despondently, "since he has been the man to leave the field, and fire his big gun from a masked battery. I am sorry for it. I would rather have let this frivolous widow down the wind, to prey at fortune, than lose my argumentative evenings with the man who doesn't believe in the Encyclopédists. What a misfortune it is to be the father of an unmarried daughter! If I were alone in the world, the man's antecedents would not be of the smallest importance. He would scarcely break into my

plate-room to steal my Cellini cup, or my Cromwellian tankards; and if he forged my acceptance, the man who discounted the bill would be the principal victim. But society reminds me that I have a daughter, and that it is for her, and not for myself, that I must choose my acquaintance."

Mrs. Harding watched her host with sharp scrutinising eyes during the brief pause in which he abandoned himself to these reflections. There had been many critical moments in the life of the woman who called herself Blanche Harding, but not one more critical than this.

At last that brief delay, which seemed so long, came to an end.

"I should be very glad if you would be a little more explicit, my dear madam," exclaimed Sir Jasper rather testily. "Of all things I dislike these vague accusations, which can neither be proved nor disproved. However, you need give yourself no further uneasiness upon the subject of Mr. Pauncefort, for that gentleman left my house two hours ago, and is not likely to reënter

it while you do me the honour to remain under my roof."

"Now if *she* is the culprit," thought the Baronet, "that will hit her rather hard."

"I thought as much!" answered the widow triumphantly. "I could see that Mr. Pauncefort recognised me yesterday evening, though his affectation of unconsciousness was very cleverly managed. You may have observed that he was not quite himself, either at the dinner-table or in the drawing-room."

"You are right, madam. My friend was gloomy," returned Sir Jasper, thoughtfully.

"Oh, there's no doubt about it," he continued mentally; "Pauncefort is the guilty party. This woman could never carry the position so boldly unless indeed she were a past mistress in the art of cool impudence."

"And now, dear Sir Jasper, I must ask a thousand pardons for having bored you with this most unpleasant topic; but my respect, my affection for your sweet Marcia—"

"You are very good!" exclaimed the Baronet,

cutting in suddenly upon Mrs. Harding's gushing apology. "Yes, I begin to feel the embarrassment which a man labours under who tries to choose his friends for himself, forgetting that he is encumbered with an unmarried daughter. Let us say no more about it, my dear Mrs. Harding. I see you are dressed for dinner, and as my own toilet is still unmade—"

"My dear Sir Jasper, I am going to leave you this moment. Pray tell me that you do not think my intrusion impertinent—"

"Not at all," murmured the Baronet, looking thoughtfully at his tenant's letter.

Mrs. Harding rose, and with one of those gliding curtsies which her admirers considered infinitely bewitching, swept her ruby-velvet splendour out of Sir Jasper's den. She went straight to the drawing-room, where she found Marcia sitting in a very thoughtful attitude, with an open book lying on the leopard-skin rug at her feet, just where it had slipped from her knee. She looked up as her visitor entered the room; and there was just a shade of disappointment in her ex-

pression as she recognised the lady in ruby velvet.

"My dear Mrs. Harding, how superbly you are dressed!" she exclaimed; "and we shall have no one here to admire your elaborate toilet, except ourselves—and Mr. Pauncefort."

"Not even Mr. Pauncefort," answered the widow gaily. "Mr. Pauncefort has left the Abbey."

"Left us! Impossible! Papa told me he was to spend some weeks with us."

Mrs. Harding shrugged her shoulders.

"That is quite possible, dearest Marcia. But, for some sufficient reason of his own, Mr. Pauncefort has left the Abbey this afternoon."

"For good?"

"I believe so. Yes, I may venture to say that I am sure he will not return—while I am here."

Marcia Denison turned in her chair to look more intently at her visitor, who was standing near a table at a little distance from her, trifling listlessly with the Laureate's last volume, gorgeous in white morocco and gold.

"Mrs. Harding," said Marcia earnestly, "do you *know* Mr. Pauncefort?"

"I do know something of him. My husband was acquainted with him fifteen years ago. I used to hear a great deal about him."

"Nothing to his disadvantage, I suppose."

"I regret to say that I heard a great deal to his disadvantage."

"Have you any objection to speak more definitely, Mrs. Harding? I am really interested in Mr. Pauncefort, and it will be very difficult for me to think hardly of him. *What* is it that you know to his discredit?"

"Nothing that I can tell you, dearest Marcia. I have just seen your papa, and I have spoken very frankly to him. I was very young fifteen years ago, and my husband was not one of those sort of men who think they are privileged to sully a wife's ears with a scandal they would not dare to repeat in the presence of any other woman. I have heard Mr. Pauncefort condemned; but his delinquencies were only hinted at. I thought it my duty to put your papa in possession of what

I know; and I can say no more. Pray let us change the subject, dear. It is such a very unpleasant one."

"Too unpleasant to be dismissed so lightly, I think," Marcia answered gravely. "I should be sorry to think ill of Mr. Pauncefort. I have pitied him so much for his loneliness—for his poverty, which seems like the poverty of a man who has once been rich; and you remember what a modern French playwright has said, '*on s'habitue quelque fois à ne pas avoir d'argent, jamais à non plus avoir.*' The poverty of a ruined gentleman must be very bitter; and I have thought that Mr. Pauncefort supports his position so nobly."

The volume in Mrs. Harding's hand was open as Marcia said this, and she was looking down at its pages, with her head slightly averted from Miss Denison. There was something very much like a smile upon her face during this little disquisition on Mr. Pauncefort's circumstances.

"It would be so difficult for me to think badly of him," said Marcia very thoughtfully. "Surely, Mrs. Harding, you would scarcely consider it just

to condemn him upon the strength of some scandal of the past, of whose details you are absolutely ignorant."

"My dear Marcia," exclaimed the widow with delightful *insouciance*, "for my own part, I am positively lax in my opinions. I have lived so long on the Continent, you know, and have associated so much with charming artistic Bohemians. But on your account I considered it incumbent upon me to tell your papa all I had ever heard against Mr. Pauncefort. And I must say that his abrupt departure is rather calculated to confirm my bad opinion of him."

Miss Denison did not make any reply to this speech. That undefined dislike, that vague antipathy to the magnificent woman whom her father had chosen to patronise, was very much in the ascendant just now over the Christian-like feeling with which she had tried to combat it. There must be some reason for our unconquerable aversion to Doctor Fell, however guilty we may feel with regard to a prejudice that is apparently so groundless; but when the unpleasant Doctor

attacks the friend we like, our hatred of him is multiplied a hundredfold all at once. Marcia tried to be very polite to Mrs. Harding when the conversation drifted into general topics; but there was something palpably constrained in her civility, which the widow was quite clever enough to understand.

Nor did Marcia recover her accustomed cheerfulness throughout that Christmas evening. She sat in her low chair by the fire, with her face half hidden by a screen of many-coloured Indian plumage, and abandoned herself to thoughtful silence, while the widow amused Sir Jasper. Never had that lady taken more trouble to make herself agreeable, and never had she better succeeded. Her vivacity was inexhaustible, her gaiety almost irresistible; and the Baronet, with whom the pleasure of the moment was all-important, gave himself up to enjoyment, and determined to believe Mrs. Harding's statement rather than the denunciatory letter in his pocket. Nothing could be more complete than the widow's triumph over her enemy.

It was very late that night when Marcia stood by the window of her dressing-room, looking out at the wide expanse of spreading lawn, the stately avenue, the distant woodland, all wan and ghostly of aspect in the pale wintry moonlight. Far away in the recesses of that wood a man watched perhaps, solitary, friendless, hopeless, sitting alone by a dreary hearth,—a modern Marius amongst the ruins of his shattered life.

Had baseness of any kind ever stained that life; and was it from disgrace as well as from poverty that Sir Jasper's tenant had come to hide himself in the quiet depths of Scarsdale Wood?

"I cannot think him any thing but what he seems," thought Marcia, musing pensively, with her forehead leaning against the broad woodwork of the window, and her eyes fixed on the moonlit distance. "I cannot think him any thing less than a high-minded gentleman, with a proud humility of noble blood, the calm philosophy of a scholar and a Christian. I will not accept a slander against him on the word of a woman I

distrust. I do not think I could believe my best friend if he spoke against George Pauncefort. Only from his own lips would I receive the evidence of his baseness."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WIDOW MAKES HERSELF AT HOME.

AFTER that Christmas evening Mrs. Harding made herself entirely at home at Scarsdale Abbey. Perhaps she was aware of Marcia's distaste for her society; but if it was so, she endured that young lady's injustice quite uncomplainingly. She knew that she pleased Sir Jasper, and that the Baronet was sovereign lord and ruler in his own house, not to be influenced in the smallest degree by a daughter for whom he had very little affection. The widow knew this, and she played her cards accordingly. She took care to intrude herself upon Marcia's society as little as possible, and, except for an occasional drive, the two ladies very rarely met between breakfast and dinner. Marcia had her own occupations, her pet Dorothy, and her Scarsdale poor. Marcia painted, and

composed music, and read her favourite books in her own apartments, and very often rode or walked in the park and woods alone; while Blanche Harding lounged in the downiest and puffiest chair by the fire in her spacious bedroom, reading a novel, or recruiting her good looks by means of a prolonged nap. The utmost intellectual labour which she ever achieved was the composition of two or three lengthy epistles, written in violet ink on pale-green paper that was overpoweringly perfumed with patchouli or otto of roses.

The widow managed to dispose of two or three hours out of every day in the elaborate process of a studied toilet. She exhibited the contents of her big trunks and the treasures of her jewel-case, as persistently as she could have done if the Abbey had been filled with visitors; and she presented some variety of personal embellishment every evening for Sir Jasper's edification. Had she any deep-laid scheme to carry out in that dull country-house? Had she any motive over and above the desire to while away two or three winter

months in a luxurious mansion? She seemed rich, and was scarcely likely to play the part of a sponge who ekes-out a limited income by long visits to country friends. Sir Jasper Denison fancied that he could read the secret of the charming widow's tactics, and gave her very great credit for her ingenuity.

"Mrs. Harding with possibly doubtful antecedents is less than nobody," mused the Baronet; "for she is a somebody whom people are apt to suspect. But Lady Denison would be a person of importance, with a platform for the exhibition of handsome dresses, and all the best dinner-tables in the county open to the display of *cabochon* emeralds and old point. But to imagine for a moment that I am so weak as that! A frivolous widow—*for life!* As a visitor she is charming, and she shall play *écarté* with me, and sing those fiery little Spanish ballads, those dreamy little German love-songs, as long as she likes; but if ever she entraps me into saying any thing—before a witness—or writing any thing that the most pig-headed of English juries can construe into

a promise to marry, I will forfeit, why—any damages those twelve pig-headed British jurymen may please to exact. No, no, my dear Mrs. Harding, I will play cards with you; I will admire you; I will devote my evenings to your delightful society; I will accept the pretty flatteries which you so subtly administer to me; I will give you the best rooms in my house and the best wines in my cellar—to say nothing of that choice Maraschino for which you have such a predilection; but I will not marry you."

Amongst the letters which Sir Jasper's post-bag brought to Mrs. Harding, there was one which evidently gave the receiver of it some annoyance. It was rather a long letter, written in a dashing masculine hand, and sealed with a big coat-of-arms ferociously supported by dragons rampant, and surmounted by a couple of crests and a bellicose motto, "I strike home." Any one versed in human nature might have made a very shrewd guess at the unpleasant character of that distinguished-looking missive, for the widow thrust it hurriedly into her pocket

after glancing at the first few lines, as if it was a letter which she could not trust herself to read in public. And after having done this, it was with considerable difficulty that she again became the gushingly spontaneous trifler she was wont to be in Sir Jasper Denison's society.

An hour after breakfast she sat alone in her own room, reading that unwelcome letter, and pondering its contents with a very moody brow.

"*Half-Moon Street*, Thursday.

"My dear Aspasia, Belcolore, Delilah, —By what name, among all the names by which dangerous beauty has been known to men and poets since the world began, am I to call you, since you do not choose to be addressed by that appellation which you received at the baptismal font? Shall it be Aspasia? You are beautiful and wise, and a modern Socrates might learn new wisdom from those rosy lips. Let it be Aspasia. I have breakfasted with some young diplomatists at the St. James's, and I am in an

expansive humour; a mood in which I think kindly of all the world, and regret, almost to tears, that every body cannot have thirty thousand a-year—beginning with myself. And now, my dear Aspasia, let us be serious. Why did you leave Homburg without informing me of your intention, without placing me *au courant* with regard to your plans? You did not imagine that there was any corner of the civilised earth where you could conceal yourself from that subtle instinct of your whereabouts which is one of the numerous evidences of the sincere and brotherly attachment I entertain towards you. My own Aspasia, the step was silly, not to say childish. When I called at your hotel and found that you were gone, I was not indignant; I was only annoyed by the discovery that a woman whom I respected as infinitely superior to the rest of her sex had, in this one affair, sunk into the lowest depth of feminine short-sightedness. Your abrupt departure was ungenerous—I pass over that; but it was also absurd. In the words of the Prince of detective

policemen: 'It was worse than a crime,—it was a blunder!'

"Need I say that I traced you with perfect ease as far as Paris? Need I say that I knew where to look you up in Paris? Unluckily I looked you up a day or two too late—you had left for England. Here I was at fault. I had not imagined that you were likely to cross the Channel, and, having crossed it, I was quite at a loss to surmise where you would take up your abode.

"What a wonderful institution is a provincial newspaper! Waiting for my attorney yesterday in a stuffy office in the Fields, I took up a paper from the dusty heap of journals on his dusty table, and read half-a-dozen vapid paragraphs in which stale scraps from the London press, local wife-beatings, and prize mangel-wurzel were arranged in an agreeable mosaic. No one but a man waiting for his lawyer in a back-office in Lincoln's Inn with a view to raising money on very shaky security could have read such a paper as that. But your Latude or your Robinson

Selkirk—no, Crusoe, will associate with rats or Negroes, as the case may be. For the time being I was Robinson what's-his-name, and the newspaper was my man Friday.

"The journal in question was the *Roxborough Conservative and Castleford Chronicle*, and the paragraph which startled me from my drowsiness ran as follows,—I copy verbatim from the notice which I cut out of the paper:

"'The Christmas festivities will be of a very quiet nature at Scarsdale Abbey, as the family affliction which shed a gloom over the neighbourhood some few years since, and has caused the lengthened absence of the Baronet and his daughter from this country, still keeps Sir Jasper Denison secluded from the society he is so eminently calculated to adorn. Beef, coals, and flannel have been, and will continue to be, liberally distributed amongst the poor of Scarsdale and its vicinity, under the auspices of Miss Denison.

"'Mrs. Harding arrived at the Abbey on Tuesday evening from the Continent,' &c. &c.

"So you see, my dear Aspasia, the professional twaddle of a provincial newspaper supplies me the information of your whereabouts; and I seize the opportunity of appealing to your generosity to rescue me from a very unpleasant dilemma."

And then followed one of those appeals for pecuniary assistance which are always so painful in their sordid details,—one of those appeals which are peculiarly horrible when they come from a man to a woman. There was a covert something in the tone of this man who wrote to Blanche Harding which hinted at a hidden influence more powerful than womanly tenderness or generosity. He wrote very politely; but he wrote like a man who makes a demand which cannot be refused, and Mrs. Harding's face grew darker as she read.

When she had finished the letter she sat for a long time with her head resting on her hand, thinking deeply.

"If I could only escape from it all, if I could escape!" she muttered. "But to find myself

penniless! No, I can bear any thing better than *that*."

Sir Jasper Denison had taken care to leave his daughter entirely in the dark as to George Pauncefort's letter and Mrs. Harding's communication. In the first place, there would have been some trouble involved in any explanation made to Marcia, and of all things the Baronet hated trouble. In the second place, Sir Jasper felt that if either the tenant of the Hermitage or the dashing widow were not quite the sort of person he should have received under his roof, there might be some blame attaching to himself for having selected these acquaintance in defiance of all social laws, which demand that a man should know whom he admits to the companionship of his daughter. Under these circumstances the Baronet determined upon holding his peace, and allowing matters to take their own course.

"If the widow's notions of a friendly visit are unreasonable," he thought, "I have only to be

capricious, and be seized all at once with a desire to spend the chilly spring months on the borders of the Mediterranean, and we get rid of her without *esclandre*. And, oh, what a blessing to avoid *that!*"

Miss Denison resumed the quiet current of her life—only deferring now and then to the pleasure of her visitor in the matter of a long drive, or a day's shopping in Roxborough or Castleford. She had so many occupations, so many little cares, so many duties which, small in themselves and performed as quietly as the movements of some delicate piece of clock-work, made in the aggregate a considerable sum of usefulness. Marcia spent a good deal of time among the poor of Scarsdale; and as Scarsdale was a little village on the farthest edge of that wood in which Mr. Pauncefort's habitation was buried, hidden and lonely as the covert of a stag, her duty often took her along a pathway winding through the wood. On most of these occasions Dorothy Tursgood accompanied her mistress, carrying a basket; silent when her mistress was silent, listening

deferentially if Miss Marcia talked, chattering gaily if Miss Marcia was pleased to encourage her chatter, and altogether behaving like a little maid whom no amount of indulgence could spoil. Sometimes, but very rarely, Marcia went upon her charitable errands alone; and it happened very often in this bleak January weather that the tenant of the Hermitage was strolling in the same pathway, attended by a mongrel dog, which he had adopted lately for his companion, and as indifferent to the blasts that howled among the leafless trees and scattered the withered fern, as if he had been some Norseman accustomed to spend the winter months in regions where the sun was never seen.

Meeting thus, Sir Jasper's tenant and Sir Jasper's daughter were wont to walk side by side in the chill afternoon sunlight, talking of almost all things in heaven and on earth, with wondering Dorothy in attendance, and the mongrel dog trotting meekly at his master's heels. How much two highly-educated people, who lead a very quiet existence, and live chiefly amongst the books

they love, have to talk about when they are sufficiently familiar to converse without restraint, and are in no way fettered by the presence of other people! How many different worlds open before them! what mystic regions stretch far and wide beyond this common earth, tempting their exploring feet! Marcia delighted in those afternoon walks with the grave traveller, who was old enough to be her father, and in whose presence her mind and soul expanded themselves as freely as they might have done had she been indeed his daughter.

Sometimes Mr. Pauncefort accompanied the fair young *châtelaine* on her charitable errands; and Marcia found to her surprise that this bronzed African traveller, this bearded recluse, was almost as welcome as herself in labourers' cottages and by the beds of sick children; although, as Dorothy very often repeated, he never gave any thing. "And yet he seems so kind, doesn't he, Miss Marcia? and I'm sure if he was rich he'd be generous, and his not being generous must be his poverty. And oh, Miss Marcia, no one that

wasn't *dreadfully* poor would wear that shabby coat!" exclaimed the little maid, who thought the produce of the silkworm and the feathers of the ostrich the noblest objects ever created by Beneficent Power.

All through January and February Mrs. Harding remained at the Abbey, succeeding so well in amusing Sir Jasper that whenever she did make some little protest about the length of her visit, and threaten an early departure, the Baronet himself invited her to remain; always taking care that his invitations, however cordial, should be so worded as to defy the most subtle of the Buzfuz tribe to torture them into the promise of marriage by inference.

"I know my *Pickwick*," thought Sir Jasper; "and I know the Scylla and Charybdis between which I have to steer my fragile bark. Scylla is pen, ink, and paper, and Charybdis is witnesses. It was Winkle who brought down ruin upon his excellent friend—Winkle, and that foolish *poulet* about the chops and tomato-sauce."

Marcia had told her father of Mrs. Harding's

vague hints affecting George Pauncefort's reputation, and the Baronet had pooh-poohed them, glad to escape a subject which was apt to make him feel rather uncomfortable. Truth will always seem more or less like itself, even when falsehood contrives to seize the best position, and place poor Truth at a disadvantage; and Sir Jasper, in despite of the widow's plausibility, was rather inclined to attach some credit to his tenant's earnest letter. He had answered that letter after his own fashion,—for he was too well-bred to leave it unanswered,—evading any definite reply, and shuffling away from the subject with polite lamentations about Mr. Pauncefort's departure.

And did Marcia believe Mrs. Harding's insinuations against the man whom she met so often, and whose society was so very pleasant to her? No; human nature is not given to belief in the person it does not like, when that person belies the friend it does like. Marcia had very little confidence in the widow's truth; and she had an instinctive trust in the man whom the widow slandered. Every time she met him; every time she

heard his voice, or looked in his face, or saw him sitting amongst the sordid squalor of some labourer's cottage, listening gravely to a woman's story of her woes and wants; every time that she saw the dark eyes soften as they fixed themselves upon some peasant's child,—that confidence in George Pauncefort's truth and honesty grew stronger. She told her father sometimes of those chance meetings with his tenant, and the Baronet uttered no word of objection to the continuance of that intimacy which had begun during Mr. Pauncefort's autumn visit to the Abbey.

"I will have an explanation with Pauncefort as soon as I get rid of the widow," he thought, "and ascertain who and what the man is. In the mean time I know he is a gentleman, and, if need were, I could rely on Marcia's good sense against a legion of bearded travellers. If the man is any thing that he ought not to be, she will be the first to find him out; for her instincts are keener than mine, and she has not my habitual laziness to contend against."

With this amiable sophistry, Sir Jasper

Denison left his daughter to take care of herself, while he lounged away his days in the retirement of his library, and allowed his evenings to be beguiled by the fascinating widow. To poor Marcia those evenings were very long and tiresome, and she was very glad when her father's favourite *écarté* suffered her to absorb herself in a book. Little by little the brightest time in her life grew to be those hours in which she walked with George Pauncefort in Scarsdale Wood; and when her home seemed dreariest, her existence most barren, she found herself looking forward to the next accidental meeting with her father's tenant as a bright oasis, the very contemplation of which rendered the surrounding desert endurable.

One day, sitting before the glass, in her dressing-room, with pretty Dorothy busily employed in brushing her mistress's dark-brown hair, Marcia's thoughts wandered, as they were very apt to wander in the dreary emptiness of her life, to that genial companionship which she had learnt to delight in.

"If I had only had such a man for my father," she thought, "how happy I might have been!"

And then all at once a crimson flush spread itself over Marcia Denison's pale face as she remembered that there was one other relationship, dearer and nearer even than the tie which binds a father to the child of his love, which George Pauncefort might bear to her.

"And I am so rich," she thought, "and so lonely, while he is poor and friendless. Would it be very strange if such a thing were to come to pass?"

But after a pause she thought regretfully—

"Oh, why does he not trust me? Why does he not tell me the story of his past life—the secret of it, if there is a secret?"

END OF VOL. I.

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

00070689

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 02 July, 2018